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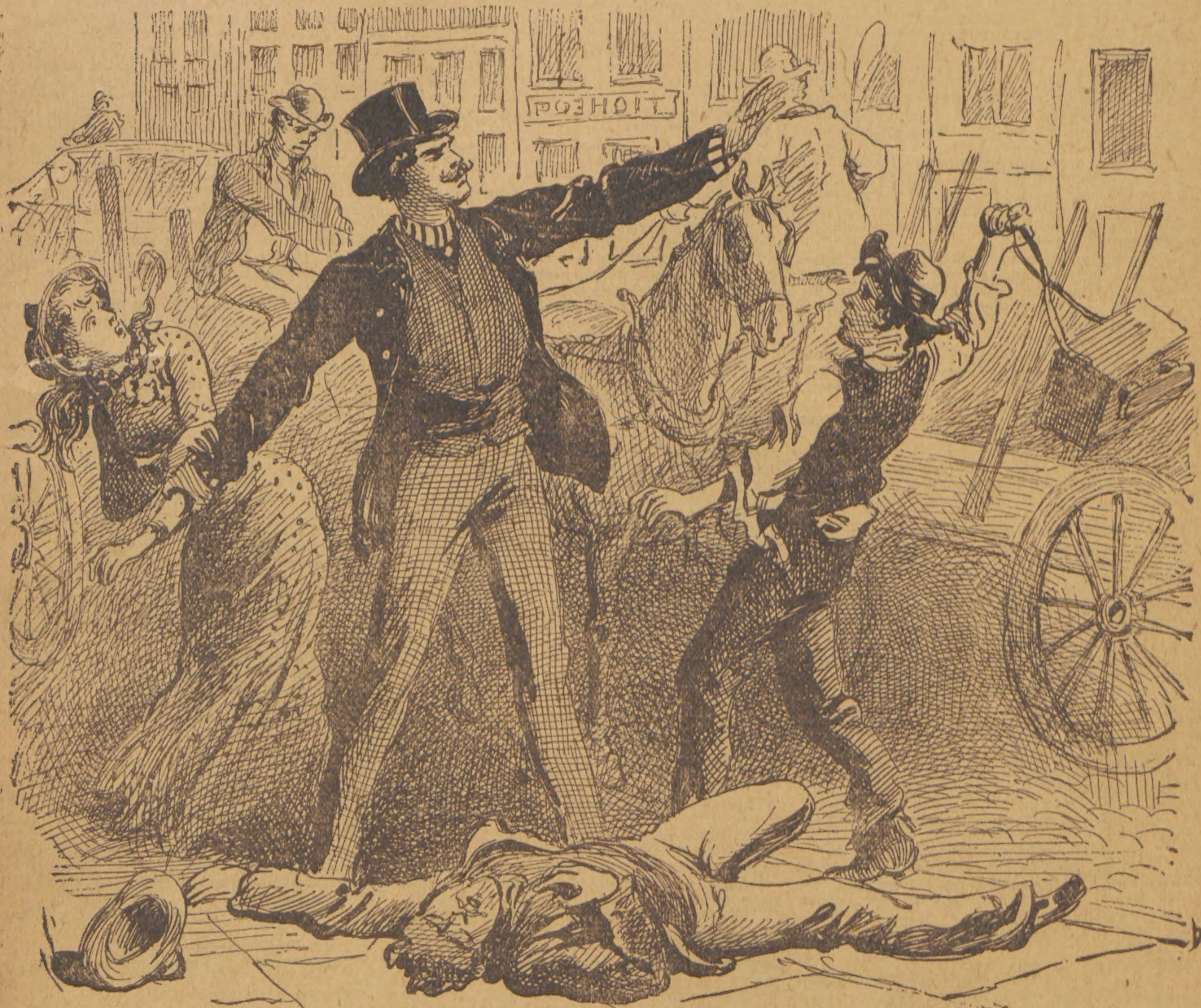
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BALTIMORE BEN, The Bootblack Detective; Or, The Fortunes of an Orphan Girl.

BY ANTHONY P. MORRIS.



THUS DISPOSING OF ONE FOE, BEN MADE A SPRING TOWARD THE OTHER MAN WHO WAS TRYING TO GRASP GARNET.

Baltimore Ben, The Bootblack Detective;

OR,

The Fortunes of an Orphan Girl.

BY ANTHONY P. MORRIS.

CHAPTER I.

A HERO AND A FIGHTER.

"Hi, there!"

"Hi! hi!"

"Look out, gal!"

A loud chorus of cries went up at the corner of Calvert and Baltimore streets on a bright May afternoon.

Cries of warning to some one there in the midst of the usual vortex of vehicles.

Drivers flourished their whips and drew hard on their reins as they tangled together before the new building of the B. & O. R. R., and there was not a little profanity mingled in their vociferations and gesticulations.

A dozen wagons and drays in a "choked" mass, and a red-line car, the driver of which put down his break hard to stop.

Hundreds of bystanders paused and gazed out into the street to see, if they could, what caused the confusion.

Whatever or whoever it was, at first they could not see.

But presently there was a sight that caused many there to shudder.

Directly beneath the feet, the iron-shod hoofs, of a pair of stout bays in an express wagon, was the form of a girl—a child almost.

Flat, and as if insensible, she lay on the Belgian blocks.

In the tangle of conveyances and freight carts, it seemed that she was doomed; though, for the instant, there was an absolute stoppage of everything in the shape of man and beast, and the instantaneously gathered crowd held its breath as it watched.

To succor her appeared to be an impossibility; but, in the moment of awful peril to a young life, out from the people that lined the sidewalk dashed a lithe and boyish figure—that of a boy who had a boot-blackening box swung over his shoulder.

And many there who recognized the lad—who was daily occupied and industriously in the vicinity of the rival ticket offices—shouted his name in something that was scarcely above a whisper or gasp.

"Bootblack Ben!"

Straight into the jam of wagons he went, darting with an almost incomprehensible agility under the bodies and between the wheels, out to the point of danger.

One even ventured to warn him away from his evident intention of rescue.

"Don't do it!" cried a voice.

"Look out, there, Ben, or you're a goner!"

But the lad paid them no heed. In another moment he was at the side of the prostrate girl.

It was not a time for ceremony. With both hands he grasped her and then dragged her away from her peril in the same manner by which he had reached her side.

He saw that she was unconscious.

All this in less time than it has taken the writer to tell it and the vehicles moved on again as if nothing had happened.

The child had gotten into her difficulty from the southern pavement. Ben brought her out on the northern pavement close to the ticket office of the Northern Central.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, as they paused beyond the curb.

Ben took a good look at her. A pretty girl she was, with great brown eyes, and but for the disfigurement of mud, she was dressed very neatly and cleanly.

He observed on the bosom of her dress a little tag.

"How did you happen to get into that fix?"

"Deed I don't know. Everything's strange to me here. I guess I lost my head going across the street. It's busier up here than it is down in Richmond."

"Did you come from Richmond?"

"Yes."

"All by yourself?"

"Yes. See: I had a tag tied onto me down there, an' there was a man to meet me at the depot. I found him there, an' we were coming up Calvert street—that's the name I heard him say—when he left me to go in and get some cakes

an' candies in the store. I thought I'd just cross over, as we were going out Calvert street, he said, an' then the first thing I knew—why, there I was, under the horses; an' I'm so glad you got me out, indeed I am."

"Let's go back across an' find the man you were with," and Ben ventured to take her by the hand, for he did not want the pretty girl to get into further difficulty.

But when he had crossed and looked searchingly around, not a sign was to be seen of the man with whom she said she had come up from the depot.

"What'll I do?" she almost sobbed.

"Isn't there anybody else you know in the city?"

"I don't know anybody. I don't want to have to sleep in the station-house," she added, with a half sob.

"Sleep in the station-house?"

"Yes."

"What'll you have to do that for?"

"That's the way they do in Richmond when anybody gets lost. They take 'em to the station house until somebody comes along to get 'em out."

"Well, you won't sleep in any station-house, I reckon, if you'll just go along with me," declared Ben.

And he added, as she looked inquiringly at him:

"I'm Ben Brush—Bootblack Ben, they call me. If you ain't afraid to go along with me, I'll take care of you until somebody advertises for you, you know. They'll be bound to do that!"

She surveyed him half-doubtingly. She had little knowledge of bootblacks in general; it was an immediate question whether a bootblack could afford to take care of any one.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"I used to be called Garnet," she responded, in a subdued voice; "but that was when mother lived. Everybody calls me the gutta-percha girl now."

"Gutta-percha girl!" he repeated, in some puzzlement.

"Yes, it's a great secret. I can't tell you now. But do you mean it?—will you really keep me until my friends come after me?"

"Of course I mean it! Come right along and I'll take you to my old mother."

Saying which, he again clasped her hand and they moved off down Calvert street.

"I live on Aisquith street, near Gay," he explained as they pursued their way, hand in hand, while the girl, with her other hand, was busy removing the mud from her garments as best she could. "I'm not like most bootblacks, as I reckon you'll find out when you see my home. I sell papers, too. Why, I've got two boys serving a route for me, every morning, besides. I'm just a young shiner of wealth, you'd better believe. And my old mother'll make you as much to home as a bug in a rug, she will."

They had turned the corner of German street, when Ben's voluble introduction of himself to his new found acquaintance was interrupted by the presence of a tall and burly man who stepped directly into their path obstructively.

"Hold on," he said, authoritatively.

"Oh, that's the one—that's the man I met at the depot," at once exclaimed the girl, making as if to advance to him, but singularly, Ben retained his hold upon her hand with a tightening clasp.

He was looking the man straight in the eye.

"Does this gal belong to you?" he demanded.

"That's exactly what's the matter, my lad."

Ben glanced at the girl's face. There was surely an expression of gladness therein; and there was also a glance that told him she was innocent in that gladness.

"Look a-here," he said to her; "do you know what kind of a man that man is?"

"Why, that's my mother's cousin that I came on here to go to; he is to be my guardian."

"What's his name?"

There was a latent keenness in the boy's question.

"Thomas Rugby—ain't it?" the last to the man.

Ben, at this, actually drew her further away.

"Miss," he said, "you're a-walkin' right into some trap."

"What are you talking about, you ragamuffin?" broke in the burly fellow, with a quick step forward. "Come, Garnet," and he reached forward to take the girl from the bootblack's protection.

"Take your hands off the girl!" the boy cried. "You're up to some game, Pooler Jim. You ain't wastin' your time over a girl to be her guardian, I know better. Miss," turning to

her with sparkling eyes, "this here man is one of the worst skimmers that loaf around the pool rooms on Gay street. He ain't after you for any good. Take my word for it; an' I ain't knocked about the corners for nothing. Don't you go with him."

What more Ben might have said in protest was cut short by a grasp that fell upon him from behind.

Two stout arms pinioned him, at the same time the burly man reached and grasped the girl.

But the lad's warning had not been altogether without effect, for Garnet held back.

Meantime Ben was struggling terrifically to release himself.

"What did he mean?" Garnet demanded of the man, and pointing to Ben as the latter struggled in the grasp of his assailant from the rear.

"He's a ragamuffin bootblack, Garnet. You come with me, and thank your stars I found you again in time to rescue you from some pitfall he may have been about to lead you into."

"Pooler Jim, you're a liar if you say I meant the gal any harm! It's you that she'd better look out for. An' I say, you sha'n't take her without we all go to the station first, to see what you are up to."

Evidently the boy well knew the man—knew him to be an evil character; and as he had read the innocent and trusting face of the girl, he felt, as if by an intuition, that there was some plot encompassing her.

And the next instant he seemed about to make his words good, that they should all go to the station-house, for, by an effort that was astonishing in one of his years, he succeeded in releasing himself from the grasp of his assailant and a moment later there was truly a lively scene on the pavement.

Unswinging his box and gripping it by the strap, he brought it twice around his head to give it momentum, then, with a splintering crash, it struck upon the head of the one who had assaulted him from behind—a man who now went staggering backward to the awning-post, falling there as if hurt to insensibility.

Thus disposing of one foe, Ben made a spring toward the other man, who was trying to grasp Garnet, to make her accompany him, and again the box swung round.

But, this time it did not accomplish its purpose, for Pooler Jim parried the stroke. Then he dealt the boy a blow that felled him to the pavement.

But this momentary triumph did not seem to favor his designs, for he cried to the other party, who was dazedly regaining his feet at the curb:

"Quick, there, Bill! The 'cursed, meddling scamp will have us in the station, as he says, if you aren't lively!"

At the curb stood a cab. The driver was evidently one of a party interested in some way in the girl, for the moment the duo of suspicious characters were within the conveyance, he whipped up the horses and disappeared around the corner at South street.

A policeman, attracted by the sign of a disturbance which drew the attention of pedestrians, came running upon the scene.

"What's the row?" he demanded.

Ben was scrambling to his feet, for, thanks to a rather thick skull, the blow dealt him was not a serious one. A great blue mark over one eye showed where the man's knuckles had struck, however.

Garnet appeared to be especially solicitous for her new friend. Excitedly she broke in with an account of the occurrence.

The outcome of it all was that the bootblack and the girl were marched off to the station-house.

CHAPTER II.

BAR-ROOM ROGUES.

"BEN BRUSH, what have you been doing?"

The police captain eyed the bootblack steadily.

Ben had never been arrested before in his life. "Fighting in the streets," volunteered the policeman, before the boy could answer.

Ben paid him no heed.

"I was defendin' this gal," he said, pointing to Garnet.

"Defending her?—how?"

"From a man 'at I know don't mean her any good, sir."

"Who was the man?"

"He was my mother's cousin, sir," said Garnet. "His name's Thomas Rugby, an' I came from Richmond to meet him here, 'cause I'm an

orphan now, sir, an' Thomas Rugby was to take care of me. I got lost from him for a little while, an' came near being killed; but this boy saved me. And then when we met Thomas Rugby, he said that Thomas Rugby wasn't Thomas Rugby at all, but a bad man who meant to do me some harm."

"What's your name?"

"Garnet."

"Garnet—what?"

"Garnet Fawnworth, sir."

As the girl uttered the name, a young man who had just then stepped into the station paused on the threshold and gazed for a moment toward the girl; then, without pausing to state his business there, he wheeled and departed abruptly.

"Ben, what's it all about?"

The captain was disposed to be easy with the boy, who had a good reputation about the stands where he was known to ply his trade.

"Why, captain, the man what wanted to take this gal was Pooler Jim, about the worst loafer round the Gay street pool-rooms, an' a man 'at I wouldn't trust with a dime to hold for me so long as it would take me to spit into my blacking box."

"Pooler Jim? Did you see the man?" to the officer who had made the arrest.

"No."

"Where do you live?" was next asked the girl.

"I came up from Richmond, sir. I haven't any friends in this city, except this boy, who said if I'd go with him he'd take me to his mother."

"But you said you were coming here to your cousin, Thomas Rugby?"

"Yes, sir. But if the man who said his name was Thomas Rugby isn't Thomas Rugby, then I don't know what to do; for I don't know where he lives."

"And you say you rescued this girl from a man known as Pooler Jim?" to Ben.

"Yes, sir, that's jest w'at I did!"

"You were going to take her to your mother?"

"Yes, sir. Goin' to see her out'n the streets into safe quarters."

"Take her, then. I discharge you."

"Will you go with me?" Ben asked the girl.

"Yes, and be very thankful to you."

As they left the station, the captain went to his telegraph instrument and began ticking off a message.

In response to that message there presently entered the station a very short, very muscular, very shrewd-faced man with black, piercing eyes and a slight mustache.

"You sent a message over to the marshal's office, captain," he said, as he came in.

"Yes, a word with you, Mr. Grip."

Seated beside the desk, the captain said:

"Pooler Jim is up to some dodge again."

"Ah!"

The captain proceeded to relate what he had gleaned and what he thought regarding the case of the bootblack and the girl.

"I know this Thomas Rugby," Jack Grip said, when the other paused. "Lives on Mount Vernon place. Pretty rich fellow."

"All the more reason for what I am about to request—and I would like to have the marshal's consent to humor me in it, if he can."

"What is that?"

"Find out what Pooler Jim is up to, and meantime have an eye kept on the girl, for I am sure that the latter will pay, especially if Thomas Rugby is rich as you say. Now, wouldn't it be better to catch on to Pooler Jim's game before informing the man, who is apparently to be the girl's guardian, where the girl is? We haven't been able to catch at anything positively crooked in Pooler Jim since he was let out from over the falls. He is a sharp one; and yet I am certain that he is a man who cannot make a living and dress as he does without doing that for which he ought to be taken in."

"I see. I'll consult the marshal. Where is the girl now?"

"Gone home with Bootblack Ben. I sent her there purposely in view of this matter. You know where the boy lives?"

"Oh, yes, very well."

"Let me hear from you, will you?"

"Yes." And Jack Grip, the detective, departed.

Meantime the hack, containing the two men with whom Ben had had the encounter, did not go far down South street. In front of the Bank of Commerce it halted, at a signal from those inside, and Pooler Jim and his companion alighted.

"You may put up the chariot," he said to

the driver; "we won't want it any more at present."

And as he walked off toward the post-office with his comrade, he continued in a vexed way:

"Blast such luck! What's to be done now? The prize has got away from us, after all my trouble down in Richmond and the neat game I played at the death-bed of the widow. I tell you, Bill, it's no pleasant thing to see a fortune slip from one's fingers like that."

"And do you mean to let it go that way?"

"No, sir!" with a slap of one palm on the other. "And I have an idea the boy will take her to his home. We can abduct her, if it comes to that. I'm bound to have her. Why, there's only two such phenomena in the world to-day, and she's one of them. With her on a stand in a canvas tent we can just coin money. And I'm in a hurry to get away from Baltimore, I tell you; it's getting altogether too hot around here."

"What do you propose?"

"That we go to the boy's home and see whether he brings her there."

"Do you know where it is?"

"Yes. Come. With the girl on the stand in some of our Western towns, posted as 'The Living Marvel of the Nineteenth Century'—the only one of two of her kind in the wide world—the elastic-skinned wonder of humanity—unequaled, unsurpassed—But here, we'll take a car; I'm not fond of walking."

Turning up Gay street, they entered a red-line car and proceeded northward, alighting at Monument street.

A short distance from the joining corners of Gay, Aisquith and Monument streets, was a neat two-story dwelling of brick. It would hardly be supposed that a bootblack could afford such a home; but it was the home of Bootblack Ben. With his aged mother he lived there, and by his industry at "shining 'em up" and selling papers, with some regular routes that had grown large enough for him to employ other boys, he was able to keep himself and her in tolerable circumstances.

Opposite the house was a beer saloon. Into this walked the pair, seating themselves at a table and calling for some of the beaded tippie.

The front of the saloon had two large windows in which were tacked some theatrical posters. Through the spaces between these it was an easy matter for one on the inside to watch the humble dwelling on the other side of the street.

And not long had they to wait to see just what was expected, for soon Ben came along, leading the girl by the hand.

As they were observed to enter the house, Pooler Jim said:

"Curse his meddling! If it hadn't been for him, I was working everything lovely. Now, the girl has taken fright maybe, and we'll have the devil's own time. But I'm bound to have her, by hook or crook, and she shall make my fortune, once I get started on the road with her, if I have to flay her alive to make her do my bidding."

Almost in the same breath, he exclaimed:

"Hello! what do you want?"

A young man had approached and lightly laid one hand on Pooler Jim's shoulder. It was the same we have seen enter and hastily leave the station house at the time when Bootblack Ben and the girl were before the captain.

He had been in the saloon when they came in, though they had not given him any special notice, supposing him to be a mere drinker at one of the tables.

"I think I can transact a little business with you," he said.

"I reckon we're not acquainted," remarked Jim, who was not one to take up every acquaintance who offered.

"Oh, that doesn't make any difference, I guess, if you're a man who don't stand back at making a few hundred dollars easily."

Jim and his partner exchanged glances.

"What are you driving at, young man?"

"Just this: you are after that girl who just now went into the house where lives Bootblack Ben."

Again they exchanged glances.

Jim waited for the other to "come out."

"Well?"

"Suppose I make it a greater object to you than it may be already, to get that girl out of the city and into a place where nobody can find her. I'll be plain, for I know by the words I overheard you utter, that you are up to something concerning her. My name is Rugby—Cicero Rugby. My father lives on Mount Vernon Place, and if you know anything, you

know that Thomas Rugby is a pretty rich bug. This very girl is coming here to be taken care of as his ward; and I know by what I have heard my father say, that he means to divide his property, in his will, equally between us. Now, I am not going to put up with any such nonsense. I went to the station to-day, at his request, to see whether anything had been learned of a girl who had been shipped, almost like an express package, to him here in Baltimore. I saw the very girl there, and I heard enough to know that you had hold of her before she fell into the hands of the bootblack, for some purpose of your own. I want the girl out of the way. Do you want to make five hundred dollars?"

"I am the very man who wants to make the money," assented Pooler Jim, in the coolest manner possible.

And he added:

"What's the color of it?"

"Cash, as soon as I know she is irretrievably missing."

"Done."

They shook hands. Then young Cicero Rugby treated the pair, and a few moments later left the men with whom he had struck the bargain which was to give them an additional incentive in the abduction of the girl.

As he went, however, his youthful and aristocratic face was troubled with inward thoughts; at last he mumbled:

"It is a sum that will have to be paid, and how I am to do it I can't see at present. I must raise the money, or the fellows will blow on me, perhaps; for maybe they did not expect to make as much money as that out of the girl. Yes, I must tax my brain for some means—some means—" and during his ride in the car homeward he appeared to be a very studious young man indeed.

For be it known that Thomas Rugby, his father, had "shut down" on the allowance for his scion under a threat of six months because of some recent scrape from which he had liberated his dude-mannered offspring after a considerable outlay of cash.

"I have it!" he muttered, at last, with brightening brow. "I have the very idea. It's not altogether just the thing, you know, for a fellow like I am, but it must be done, and so there is an end of it. I get a good idea from this very scum of a bootblack who has polished my boots often. Yes, I have it, and I think on a pretty grand scale, if it works at all."

That evening the wealthy Thomas Rugby was somewhat surprised to be handed a note that had been "left" for him by his son, who had departed on a brief trip to visit an aunt in Philadelphia. But the fertile-minded Cicero had not departed for Philadelphia by any means.

CHAPTER III.

THE VILLAIN'S WORK.

MRS. BRUSH was rather surprised to see her son coming home at the unusually early hour in the afternoon.

This was augmented when Ben said, cheerfully:

"I've brought a daughter home for you, mother."

"Why, Ben—" pausing and glancing at the shy girl who hung back upon the threshold, as if uncertain whether to brave the reception.

"Come in, Garnet, and let me introduce you to my mother," and he gently forced her forward.

Perhaps the tidy surroundings encouraged Garnet, for she advanced and placed her little hand in that of Mrs. Brush while she said:

"He saved my life, ma'am."

"I'll tell you all about it, mother," and Ben proceeded to relate all that had transpired at the time of and since his singular meeting with the girl.

While he was thus engaged, Garnet was watching him closely and dividing her glances between mother and son.

She saw in Ben a very handsome young fellow of not more than fifteen years, in whose eyes there was a sparkle of intelligence that surely indicated, together with his singularly good language for a bootblack, a mind somewhat above his station.

For Mrs. Brush had known better days when her husband lived and had given her only child every opportunity to learn as long as the slender means which she possessed held out.

By the time the money was gone, Ben at least had learned to read and write and could speak without shocking those who heard by uncouth speeches.

By the time he had finished his recital, Gar-

net was inspired by a confidence in him—this heightened as Mrs. Brush tenderly embraced her and said:

"Of course, of course, my child; you shall have a home here with Ben and his old mother as long as you wish it, if you never find your friends."

"Oh, but I'm sure that Thomas Rugby will find me, and so I won't be a burden on you," declared Garnet, confidently.

"Another thing, mother," Ben said, gravely. "You must keep your eyes on Garnet all the time. Don't let her go out anywhere," and he impressed her with the fact that a notorious character named Jim Pool—or Pooler Jim—was after the girl for no good.

"I'll watch over her like my own flesh and blood, my dear son. Have no fear."

"Then I'll be off. I haven't made my day yet. Mother'll take care of you, Garnet."

The lad started out again to finish up the day with his blacking-box.

Hardly had he gone as far as the corner, however, when an unaccountable misgiving came over him.

Almost involuntarily he turned about and retraced his steps.

As he reached the door-step, a shrill scream penetrated his ears, coming from the interior of the house.

It must have been a very customary weapon, that bootblackening-box of his, for instantly upon hearing the cry, he unswung it from his shoulder, and with the strap gripped ready for a circling stroke, he sprang up the stairs.

The thrill of apprehension that was in his young heart at the unmistakable sound of distress was intensified presently by the sight that burst upon him as he reached the upper landing.

The little sitting-room, even in the short time of his absence, had undergone a transformation.

The table was overturned, chairs were displaced; at one side, half on her knees, and supporting herself by clutching the lounge against the wall, was Mrs. Brush, with one hand pressed to her brow.

"Mother! what has happened?"

"Oh, Ben! Oh, my boy! I'm so glad you've come—"

"Where's Garnet?" he broke in, noting that the girl was not in the room.

"Gone, Ben!"

"Gone!" he echoed.

"Yes," regaining her feet dizzily. "They took her away while I must have been unconscious, I think, for they struck me down while I was trying to keep hold upon the girl. Didn't anybody hear my screams?—I made as loud an outcry as I could. And oh, Ben, the girl! I don't know whether I am sorry that she is gone or not—"

"Mother, what are you saying?" exclaimed the boy, overwhelmed at the thought that the pure and innocent girl who had so singularly become his charge might now be in the hands of Pooler Jim—for that it was Pooler Jim who had been there he did not for a moment doubt.

"Ah, my son, such a girl. She is something that is not human."

"What do you mean?"

"Before I saw them make away with her with what little of consciousness remained to me, I saw one of the men grasp her by the skin of her neck as she tried to elude them. And then—"

"Well?"

"Ben—the whole skin of her neck came straight out to a length of about a foot! It did not seem to hurt her in the least, for she did not shriek, as any one would if their skin was pulled out in that way. Then, as she got away from them, the skin went back to its place with a snap that I heard plainly. They grasped her again, by the arm, and the skin of her arm did the same thing—came a great ways out, until I could almost see through it. Oh, Ben, what kind of girl was it that you brought here?"

Ben was immediately thinking of Garnet's strange speech that at her home in Richmond some people had called her the gutta percha girl.

The phenomenon related by his mother must mean something in connection with this.

But he did not pause to think upon the singular thing.

Chivalrous, and especially interested in the girl whom he had, he felt, snatched once from the evil claws of Pooler Jim, his instant thought was of doing something toward the rescue of Garnet if she was indeed in the clutches of the man.

He turned and ran from the house.

On the street all was serene; no sign there of anybody who might be abducting a young girl. Then he hastened through the little yard to the gate opening on the alley.

A woman from an adjoining yard was there emptying a bucket of wash suds.

"Did you see any one come out of my mother's yard?" he asked.

"Yes, about five seconds ago," was the reply.

"What kind of a looking person?"

"Two men they were, and one with a bag over his shoulder. He asked me if I had any rags to sell, and one was carrying a pair of scales, while the other carried the bag."

A bag!

This meant a great deal to the alert boy.

He realized at once that the adroit abductors had used the bag and scale business for a blind.

He dashed down the alley to the street.

At the corner of the fence he met a small and muscular man.

"Hello, Ben."

"Mr. Grip! I'm powerful glad to see you just about now."

It was Jack Grip, the detective.

"What for?"

"There's been an abduction."

"An abduction! Why, who has been carried off, my lad?"

"Just one of the sweetest girls you ever laid your eyes on. I brought her to my home for my mother to take care of until I could find out where to look for a relative of hers who is somewhere in the city. I wasn't out of the house more than five minutes before I went back again; but even in that time her enemy had got in there, struck down my mother, and made off with her. It's a case of abduction, sir, and I want your help."

"Look here, Ben, do you mean to tell me that the girl, Garnet Fawnworth, has been carried off?"

"That's exactly it. But how did you know her name?"

"I'm shadowing around here on her very account. More than that you must not ask, my boy. But, come, let us go and see your mother—"

"And while we are doing that they will be able to get her into some place where we may never find her."

"You seem to take an abundance of interest in her welfare."

"I do, sir."

"Well, we must have some description of the abductors if we want to hope to find her. Come—"

"But I know who has taken her!" declared Ben, stoutly.

"Who?"

"Pooler Jim."

"How do you know it was Pooler Jim?"

"Guess I can argue a little, can't I?" said Ben, with a show of spirit. "Doesn't all that has transpired about her go to prove that he is the man?"

"And what has happened to her in which the rascal was mixed?"

Ben told Grip what had occurred.

The lad's recital was substantially the same as the captain's information.

Besides, Grip had learned more of the girl since his brief interview with the captain.

There had come a note from Thomas Rugby, of Mount Vernon Place, saying that his expected ward from Richmond had not arrived, and asking if some steps could not be taken to ascertain her whereabouts, as she was known to him to have left the city of Richmond. Grip happened to be in the marshal's office when the communication was received, and learning its contents had at once informed his chief of his recent interview with the police captain.

At first the marshal was for bringing the girl, without delay, into the presence of her apparently anxious guardian. But Grip prevailed upon him to heed the captain's suggestion that Pooler Jim was probably up to some deep game which would warrant his being sent over the falls, as the authorities had long regretted that James Jarrett—Pooler Jim—had ever gotten out of limbo and that they had not since had any square opportunity to send him "over" again, and Grip was instructed to place a shadow on James Jarrett and watch the house of the bootblack for developments.

The developments had come sooner than expected, and before the shadow, who knew the haunts of Pooler Jim well, could get a sight of that individual.

Entering the house, where Mrs. Brush was setting things to rights again, having fullest confidence in her son's capability of attending

to the matter of the girl's abduction, the detective immediately asked:

"Can you give me a description of the man or men who carried off the girl, madam?"

"This is Jack Grip, one of the detectives," said Ben, introducingly, and with a perceptible pride at being able to claim an acquaintance with the sleuth.

Mrs. Brush could not give any description that was of moment to the detective. She had only had time to see two men rush into the room while she was talking with the friendless girl—men who had evidently stolen into the house from the back-yard—when she received a blow that felled her to the floor, though it did not entirely render her unconscious.

On the phenomenon of the girl's skin being of such elasticity that it could be dragged far from the usual rotundity of neck and arm, she dilated in an excited manner.

"Mother thinks she couldn't be an ordinary human person," Ben vouchsafed, as an excuse for his mother's excitement on the unusual subject.

"Oh, she is not the only person in the world with an elastic skin, madam," said Grip, "though they are so scarce that they are sought for by the museums. That fact may help us to find her. For, let me tell you, she will be a grand heiress, no doubt, if she can be restored to the gentleman who is at this moment seeking her—Mr. Thomas Rugby—"

"Pooler Jim tried to pass himself off on her as Thomas Rugby," interpolated Ben.

Grip took his departure.

But Ben was determined to look for the girl on his own account, and he resolved that in his profession of bootblack he could pursue his investigations as well as some of the shadows who were making their mark in the Monumental City.

He did not go out again that day. His mother was too nervous to be left alone; but he resolved that if Pooler Jim was yet in town he would find him and track him down to punishment for the crime he was perpetrating upon the girl who was, he had now learned, a young heiress.

CHAPTER IV.

A BOOTBLACK SPECULATOR.

BRIGHT and early Bootblack Ben started forth.

He did not, however, seek his usual locality for the plying of his trade at the corner of Calvert and Baltimore streets.

Instead, he sought the vicinity of the pool rooms on Gay street above Fayette, because he believed that there he might catch a glimpse of Pooler Jim.

At the moment that Ben was in front of the Variety show room a gentleman inquired, at the corner of Baltimore street:

"Where in the world can I find a bootblack?"

For, strangely, there was not one of this craft to be found there, in front of the saloons, which was, usually, a camping ground for the lads.

But had any one cast an eye up toward the corner of Fayette, they would have been arrested by an uncommon sight.

At least a score of bootblacks were congregated there, and against the wall of the shoe store was one who seemed to be the center of attraction to the rest.

A new bootblack—and something out of the ordinary line.

His box was brand new and of a superior kind; his clothes were tidy above the best average; he had in his mouth a cigar that was unmistakably of a costly brand, and his manners were those of one who felt himself above his profession.

"Yes, it's a good cigar," said the nice bootblack, addressing those nearest to him, "I don't smoke no common stuff, I don't. I get mine at Gieke's. You fellers could do the same, if you was on'y smart enough. An' it's paid for, too, don't you forget it. This 'ere box w'ot I carry? Why, bless yer spitty mouths, I on'y do it fer a blind, that's all. I ain't no need to black boots. Say, why don't yer show some good in yer an' be a man like I kin. Just es easy es a wink."

Out of the dozen who had congregated and were listening to the talk of the new bootblack—who had also popularized himself to a degree by distributing a couple of the fragrant weeds among his closest admirers—one ventured to inquire:

"Say, reckon you've got a rich uncle inter the lunatic asylum, hain't yer?"

"Nary time. I'm me own uncle just about now. I am."

"Where do you get it frum—the lush—the duckits?"

"There's where you're 'off,' if you expect me for to give it clean away—"

"Let's have it, cully."

"What road did you come in at, anyhow, I'd like to know?" put one, who gazed with longing and envious eyes on the dark and fragrant cigar.

The new bootblack was quiet and thoughtful for a few moments.

Then he slipped his arm in the arm of one of the taller boys near and said:

"I want to tell you something."

Stepping off a few paces; he added:

"What kind of a blister are you, anyhow? Are you in for making a pile?"

"I don't mind."

"I don't like to give the thing clean away—but if you want to do as I'm a-doing, an' give up blackin' boots fer a livin', jest say the word, an' I'll give you the chance. But it's on'y 'tween you an' me, remember."

"That's all right," acquiesced the other bootblack, who began to congratulate himself that he was about to learn the secret of his envied brother of the profession making so much money in an easy way.

"Well, I'm a speculator in bananas, I am."

"A speculator!" exclaimed the other, in surprise.

"You bet. Listen, an' if you want to go in, here's your chance. I've got the inside track of all the fruit-dealers on Baltimore street, clear out to Pine street—they all buy of me, 'cause I save them the trouble, don't you see, of gal-lavantin' away from their stands down to the wharf. They buy of me at a little above to save trouble—"

"Little above?"

"Yes. Them's margins. I make the margins. Why, there's no less than fifty of 'em. Every time the Havana steamers comes in, I don't clear less than a hundred dollars outen 'em."

"Sho!"

"Now if I had the capital for to extend, you know, I could make double an' treble. Oh, I'm a blood bootblack, I am, I tell you; an' all I need is more capital, an' then I'll show you fellers sights. But don't you go for to imagine that you can get in where I'm at 'cause I've given it away, my rubbin' pard. I've got it all," and he gave the other a sly wink that meant: "I've got my business down fine, and I don't care who knows it, for they can't break me up."

"Say, can't a feller come inter this thing?"

The crowd of other bootblacks, aware that something of special moment in regard to the wealthy bootblack was in progress, waited in a mass at the corner while this dialogue transpired.

Casting a dubious glance toward them, our nice bootblack said:

"If you was all like me, you'd put your money inter somethin' w'ot pays, you would."

"Well, how are we going for to do it?"

"I'll tell you. An' if you're a mind to go in, all right. But I don't care about th' bull of 'em knowin' it. I need capital, I do, on'y for to extend business, es the 'vertisements in the papers say. Here's the way of it. I've got the track of the fruit fellers. I buys from the steamers an' sells to them. I'm a jobber—a speculator. 'Tain't much margin on a single man, but it counts on the whole, an' there's a big profit. Now, if I could make a pool and buy more bananas, don't you see, I could put 'em up fer more dealers, an' then comes the divvy accordin' to the 'vestment. Why, if you was to 'vest a quarter, I could pay profits at ten per cent., as the bankin' fellers says, in five days, an' then if you was to invest the profits instead of drawin' 'em, by the next speculation I'd be able for to give you twenty-five per cent. on the whole thing; or I'd pay the profits, if you wanted 'em. It's plain es day, an' I on'y lack capital—"

"Put me in fer a dollar!" exclaimed the other bootblack, breaking in and producing at the same time the last cent he had earned that morning from his papers and boot-blackening combined.

And he added:

"But say, look a-here—if you want for to raise capital, w'ot do you want to keep the thing so quiet for? Nobody ain't a-going to spoil this game o' yours so long's you work it on a plan o' that kind. I'm in, I am; an' if you'll say the word, I'm a liar if all the boys in town don't make up money enough to keep the thing a-goin' till we're all millionaires."

At this the nice bootblack cogitated.

"Done!" he said, as if arriving at a momentous conclusion. "An' you kin tell 'em 'at I'm ready to settle up any time after a boat load o'

bananas has been in twenty-four hours. I mean business, I do."

"You just come back here an' talk to ther boys, an' I won't go to the peanut galler fer a month if they don't all take you up on that thing."

They returned to the crowd.

But at that instant a policeman, observing that there was something like a mob of bootblacks congregated at the shoe-store corner, crossed over with his eyes on them suspiciously.

"Let's go down to the falls," suggested one.

At which they moved off in a body toward the bridge.

Here, on the footpath, the nice bootblack made a speech that seemed to them a little above the mental capability of the ordinary bootblack, but sufficiently comprehensive for them to understand that for every dollar invested in the banana pool they would receive a dollar and ten cents in five days, and if the profits were re-invested, at the end of another five days—the interim of the arrival of the Havana steamers—the investment would pay them twenty-five per cent on the whole.

It became then only a matter of dollars of investment to assure the speediness of acquiring a lazy fortune through the labors of this nice bootblack who appeared to have the inside track of the fruit-dealers.

"And the steamer Grip-Fast will be in ter-night," concluded he, after an explanation of his operations, "an' all you fellers w'ot wants to be millionaires, jest say so, an' I've got a book here for to put the names down—"

"Say," shouted a spry newsboy from the exterior of the circle, "who's a-goin' to figure out the thing when some puts in a dime an' some twelve cents an' some a dollar an' so on?"

"Jest es plain as bread an' molasses. I puts down the 'vestments accordin' to the name, an' when the sales is all in, I kin take ther book to a business college an' have it fixed for the askin'. They're powerful anxious for to increase the education of the bootblacks of this town, you bet, an' they'll explain the whole *modus operandi* while they're a-doin' it."

Then followed some canvassing among the crowd by the first bootblack who had received the confidence of the young speculator, and there was considerable discussion on the new topic of speculation on bananas.

Some excitement prevailed, too.

No wonder people were asking:

"Where in the world have all the bootblacks gone?"

It was not long before a number of subscribers to the speculation were obtained.

But there were a few among the smarter element, who held back. They had resolved to wait and see whether this scheme had anything in it or not.

The nice bootblack accomplished wonders there in a short space—wonders for a speculative scheme among a class of bootblacks like himself, or like he appeared to be.

At the expiration of twenty minutes he had not less than twenty dollars in his pocket, and his fingers were wonderfully apt, some of the shrewder noticed, for a common bootblack, in putting down the names and the amount of the subscribers to the stock of investment.

Hardly had the last entry been made, when a voice cried, from the outer circle of the crowd:

"You boys think you're pretty smart. But I'll bet a cake you are going to lose on that thing!"

A score of faces were at once turned toward the speaker.

"Bootblack Ben!" exclaimed several in a breath.

"Yes, it's me, an' nobody else. What are you fellers a-doin', shootin' off your money that-a-way? Ain't you any better sense? What'll your mothers say to-night when they are expectin' you to bring home the pennies for to keep the pot a-boilin'?"

"Say, you shet up!"

The words were from the new bootblack.

He evidently felt himself to be a power now among the clan around him. His tone had an authoritative ring.

"I'm not shuttin' up for anybody," retorted Ben. "What are you a-drivin' at around here, anyway, takin' the pennies away from them that makes an honest livin' for their old mam-mies. There's many a boy here 'at knows he ought to take home every cent he can get out o' the trade to the old woman at home who gives him a comfortable bed to sleep in. Who are you, anyhow?"

And Ben elbowed his way to the front.

There was a murmur among the boys.

"He don't belong down here on Gay street,"

vouchsafed one, sullenly—one of those who had invested the largest in the speculative pool.

"He's a Calvert street feller."

The words were taken up.

Then the murmur grew louder.

Within a few minutes after making his first intrusive speech, Ben found that he was being looked upon as an interloper.

"I don't take back a word I've said," he announced. "That fellow is trying to skin you chaps. He's a sharper; an' I don't believe he's even a bootblack."

The sullen murmurs grew louder.

Though off of his usual ground, Ben was known to all the bootblacks and newsboys as a youngster who never backed water from anybody who might "tread on his coat tails."

But there existed a feeling of enmity between the Calvert street and Gay street bootblacks at the time, which even the patrons of the knights of the brush were aware of—indeed, a gentleman who might place his foot on a box in front of Philbins, would almost immediately hear the remark as to whether his boots were blacked last by the Gay street boys or the Calvert street boys.

It would appear that the nice bootblack knew of this animosity, and availed of it promptly.

"Say," he shouted; "are we to have a coal-stove polisher from Calvert street come down here an' break up our business? I ain't a-goin' for to permit it, I ain't!"

Few though the words, they had an instantaneous effect, as if only that was needed to cause a belligerent breaking out of hostile feeling on the part of the Gay street bootblacks.

"Rah fer Gay street!" yelled one.

Ben was at the front of the crowd when the shout went up.

He wheeled and faced the utterer of the words.

And by this time a dozen bystanders had forged forward to the unusual congregation of bootblacks.

"You fellers think you can scare me—but you can't. I've said my say: you're being skinned, an' if you won't listen to my advice, you can take the consequences. This here feller—"

Thuck!

Before Ben could complete his sentence, he received a blow on the cheek from a hard fist that almost knocked him down.

He was staggered for an instant, then he made for the one who had struck him.

It was the nice bootblack.

"Take that!"

"I'm a-takin' a whole heap like that!" shouted Ben, recovering himself instantly.

And then the Gay street bootblacks were treated to a specimen of what the Calvert street representative was capable of.

At one jerk Ben had his blacking-box swung around and off his shoulder; then, grasping it by the strap as we have seen him do previously; he "waded in."

Waded in, because the stroke of the nice bootblack seemed to be accepted as a signal for the rest to pounce upon the rival bootblack from Calvert street.

Twice round his head circled the box.

Twice in quick succession down came the box on the nearest heads, and within the space of four seconds the bridge over Jones Falls, at Fayette street, was a scene of miniature riot.

Ben proved himself equal to the emergency.

No one could get within the circling of that terrible blacking-box, and another went down who tried the experiment.

In the melee, none noticed that the new bootblack had drawn aside after his first blow, and was not taking part at all in the fray.

Suddenly the scene was changed.

A hundred people were running toward the scene of the fight, which had the aspect of no ordinary affair, and foremost was a policeman.

A signaling cry went up from the bootblacks.

Like a lot of scared deer they scampered before the officer arrived upon the spot.

Ben followed their example; he could not afford to be arrested at that time, when he had what was most important business to him on hand.

And throughout the brief fight there on the bridge, he had kept his glance as much as possible on the "nice bootblack."

This lad was disappearing in the direction of the old Sixth Regiment armory.

Ben followed him hot-footed.

CHAPTER V.

THE BOOTBLACK AS A "SHADOW."

UP Front street whirled the running bootblack after the one who had gotten him into the trouble on the bridge.

Ahead he saw the boy.

"I'll have it out of him, if I die for it," he resolved.

But he was checked by something unexpected.

Across the narrow street came a man who planted himself directly in the path of the nice bootblack.

And this man was no other than Pooler Jim. Sight of him instantly roused the thought in Ben's mind:

"If Pooler Jim was the man who abducted the girl, he is either a brazen, bold man, or he isn't the man at all who took her."

Jim went straight up to the boy.

Ben was close enough to hear what was said.

The departing bootblack was not aware of being followed; he had not cast a glance over his shoulder after turning into Front street.

"That's a good rig," remarked Jim, familiarly.

"What are you talkin' about, mister?"

Jim haw-hawed loudly.

"Come! You can't play it on me, kid, if you did on the bootblacks. I see the racket. And I've something to tell you, my young friend Cicero."

"Hush!"

"Oh, I ain't talking loud enough for anybody to hear," and Jim cast a searching glance around.

Before that glance was given Ben had slunk behind a convenient stoop.

Underneath the stoop was space sufficient for him to see the couple without being seen himself.

He was after the nice bootblack to give him a good drubbing—of which feat he felt himself fully capable—when he saw here a development that promised far more than revengeful satisfaction.

"I've got the girl," added Pooler Jim.

"How in the world did you ever penetrate my disguise?"

"Easy as mud. It's a wonder that the bootblacks you're mingling with didn't tumble to the fact that you've a very white hand; and between you and I, do you know that you've got on the same ruby-mounted ring you wore when you made the bargain with me and my partner at the saloon on Aisquith street—"

"That's enough!" broke in the bootblack, who was no other than the scion of a wealthy father.

"Now, kid, where's the money—"

"Yes, but where's the girl?" interrupted the disguised Cicero.

"Safe enough."

"That don't satisfy me. Where is she? I want to see her."

"Will you meet me to-night—in your proper rig, mind—at Louis Rhinehart's?"

"Yes."

"Then you shall see her. And mind: bring along the money, or I'll raise such a smell about Mount Vernon Place that you won't find it pleasant. I'll blow to the marshal, if it costs me my situation."

Cicero Rugby did not stop to inquire what the other's "situation" might consist of.

He immediately said:

"I'll be there, and if I don't bring the money, I'll bring part of it. Will that do?"

"That'll do."

The two separated.

For a few seconds the nice bootblack stood cogitating.

Then he wheeled back and started toward the Fayette street bridge again.

Ben did not intercept him now.

He had seen sufficient to warrant his keeping "shady."

"I'll spot the pair of 'em," he resolved. "There's something between the two that concerns the gal. I'm bound to find out the whole racket, for Garnet's sake, if I die for it!"

The girl had roused a strange interest in the boy's breast.

He followed the disguised bootblack back over his retracing course and stood not far from him when he even went down on his knees, in front of a Gay street restaurant, to black a gentleman's boots.

And the operation showed Ben that the lad was not an experienced bootblack.

"Cicero—Cicero," he murmured to himself several times. "I wonder who this Cicero is."

Throughout that day he kept his eyes on the strange bootblack, and during the interval received many scowling glances from the rival bootblacks of the locality.

About four o'clock in the afternoon the nice bootblack disappeared—but not until he had

received an additional subscription to the banana fund from others who were persuaded to invest by the exaggerated accounts of those who were already in the pool.

Ben, like a detective sleuth, was watching the lad.

He had left his box in a store.

He had borrowed another coat from a brother bootblack at the corner of Calvert and Baltimore streets, as he followed his quarry westward.

Then he saw the lad enter a car.

He did likewise.

The former alighted in the vicinity of the turn near Mount Vernon Place, and Ben saw him enter a fine house, going in by the rear basement way.

As if he was but a shadow that was left behind, he waited, resolved to wait until day-dawn if necessary, though he knew that the mysterious youth was to meet with Pooler Jim that afternoon or night by engagement.

And his vigil was rewarded.

A young man soon came from the house—this time from the front door; and Ben gave only one keen glance to discover in the well-dressed representative of wealth, the identical lad who had played himself off for a brother bootblack.

Cicero Rugby did not dream that he was shadowed by one of the bootblacks among whom he had been mingling as one of them that morning.

He leisurely sauntered toward the library of the Peabody Institute, into which he entered and remained there during the remainder of the day.

"Reckon he's got his lunch in his pocket," ruminated Ben, who, from his point of observation outside, was growing pretty hungry. "But if he stays in there a week, I'll not give up; for Pooler Jim is to meet him to-night, an' if I don't flinch, I'll be the first to find out where they've got the little gal—bless her pretty face—I'm in love with it."

It was late in the afternoon when Cicero came forth.

The hungry bootblack who was now playing the detective sleuth drew back behind the screening shadow of the railing at the monument as he saw his quarry again on the move.

As he had reason to expect, Cicero started toward the blue-line railway and took a car.

Ben was prepared for this, and when Cicero was on the inside of the car, he was on the front platform.

About dusk he was still close to his shadowed prey when the latter entered Rhinehart's restaurant.

"Guess mother'll wonder what has become of me," he mused, as he hung around the door of the saloon. "But I'm bound to find out what they've done with Garnet, if I die for it."

As night was drawing down, he observed Pooler Jim coming forward along Gay street.

He knew that the man must be the abductor of Garnet.

But what proof had he?

His only method was in watching the two—the lad known as Cicero and the man himself, between which two had passed sufficient to convince him that they were in collusion regarding the girl.

Fortunately for an idea which struck the boy when he entered the restaurant, he was acquainted with the proprietor.

"He beckoned 'Louis' aside and said:

"I'd like to have a messenger boy, please, sir."

"A mess—" began Louis, loudly; but Ben checked him by a gesture.

"Not so loud, Mr. Rhinehart, please. Yes, I want a messenger boy. Please call one. Here's the money."

He produced a quarter.

The proprietor turned the crank of the call.

Within a minute there was a boy on hand from the office on Fayette street.

Cicero Rugby was idly drinking a glass of beer at the counter and did not notice that the bootblack beckoned the messenger lad toward the rear of the saloon.

He did not even recognize Ben as the boy with whom he had had the fracas in the morning, because Ben had, with an almost detective ingenuity, changed his appearance by having borrowed a different hat from another bootblack with whom he was acquainted, before entering the restaurant.

"Do you want me?" the messenger asked, looking upon Ben with a dubious glance.

"Yes. How much to take a dispatch to the office of the police marshal?" pausing as

young Cicero just then happened to glance in his direction.

He took the messenger boy by the arm in a familiar way and led him out into the yard.

In the gloom he said:

"I want a message taken to the office of the police marshal, for Mr. Jack Grip. What's the charge?"

"Fifteen cents. Where's the message?"

"Tain't written out—you must take it by your mouth."

"What is it?"

"This: Tell the marshal, or Mr. Grip, if you can see him, that Bootblack Ben wants to see him right away at Rhinehart's restaurant on business that's most important, you understand?"

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

"Where's the money?"

"Here," and Ben handed over the amount.

Away went the boy.

"I guess that's fixed," Ben thought, as he carelessly sauntered into the saloon.

At that moment he saw Pooler Jim addressing the young scion.

What they said, he could not hear; but in a few seconds they went out and entered a hack that was in waiting at the curb.

Ben was not to be "left."

Ere the driver had whipped up his horses, our bootblack had glided unobserved to the trunk-board at the rear of the hack and gained a hold.

As the hack drove off he clung there like a very monkey.

"I'm sorry Mr. Grip didn't get here in time," he thought. "I'd have liked him to see these two together, an' maybe he'd recognized the young man whose name is Cicero."

But unknown to Ben, the detective was "on hand."

Grip, in a disguise, was watching Pooler Jim, having gotten on the train of the crook from information received from the man he had star ed out early in the day to hunt up the suspected party.

He was not ten feet away when the hack departed.

And Grip evidently had a hack of his own ready for the emergency, for instantly he was in pursuit of the pair in the first hack inside a conveyance which came with a whirl to the curb at a signaling sign.

"Follow that hack," he instructed, briefly.

He had seen Ben attain his somewhat novel position on the rear of the other hack; he knew that the boy was conducting a piece of detective business in his own way. It rather pleased him, for he muttered to himself, in the darkness of the interior of his seat:

"I think that's a smart boy. Make a detective out of him some day, maybe."

Grip had not been in when the messenger boy arrived at the marshal's office with the communication from the restaurant.

He had been shadowing Pooler Jim for some hours.

A long and strangely devious course was that pursued by the hack containing the shadowed pair.

Strange, because, after a roundabout way, it at last entered the dark thoroughfare of Concord street below Pratt, where even in the earlier hours of the evening there is an air of desertion and spectral hauntings.

During the drive the bootblack had clung tightly to his uncomfortable perch on the trunk-board.

Nor did he leave it when he saw the two alight and enter a large old frame building on the side toward the falls.

CHAPTER VI.

YOUNG CICERO IN BAD COMPANY.

WHEN the hack halted at the dwelling on Concord street, and before Pooler Jim and his companion alighted, the former said:

"He certainly hangs on well."

"What are you talking about?" asked Cicero.

"You're green."

"Green?"

"Well, somewhat."

"I'd like to know what in the world you drove all around town in that way for, to get here, when we might as well have come straight down from the restaurant."

"Look out that window."

He made a motion toward the rear window of the hack, which Cicero caught indistinctly in the gloom.

Doing as bidden, he said:

"Well?"

"Don't you see anything?"

"No."

"Well, we've been shadowed, that's all. Look again. Hush! don't talk loud. Do you see that boy hanging onto the trunk-board? If you don't, you're pretty blind."

"I see!"

"Hush, now! Just let me work it."

Jim alighted and entered the dilapidated house, followed by the young scion of wealth.

The hackman who had brought them there was the same whom we have seen serving Pooler Jim and his pal on a former occasion.

He seemed to understand his business by previous instructions, for he immediately drove off.

In the semi darkness, Ben dropped from his hold on the trunk-board and crouched low on the cobbles at the curb, and so very black was the locality that he believed himself totally unobserved.

When the hack was out of sight, the venturesome boy glided quickly forward to the door of the house.

He had resolved to enter the building at every hazard.

To his surprise and gratification he found the door unlocked.

A moment later and he was standing in the entry.

He could not see his hand before his face.

But there was a guiding sound that told him which way to proceed if he wished to keep close on his quarry.

He heard voices in conversation, though the words uttered were indistinguishable.

The sound came from above—on the next floor, the boy at once knew.

Stealthily he groped forward.

Up the rickety stairs he went, and presently a flickering light served to further guide him in his uncertain course.

But the voices suddenly ceased.

And then—before Ben could realize that he had walked into a cunning trap, he received a blow upon the head which laid him insensible on the floor at the landing.

Not altogether insensible, for he felt a pair of strong hands dragging him into the room at one side, and a voice said:

"There! I reckon the imp won't bother me any more—cuss 'im!"

"Have you killed him?" inquired the voice of Cicero.

"No pity if I have. I struck him on the temple with this sand-bag. I always carry a sand-bag, I do. There—let him lay there till Bill comes, and I'll have him tossed into the falls. That'll be an end of Bootblack Ben."

Even as the villain was speaking, the boy's senses were returning to him; but he gave no sign of this.

He wanted to see what these two were playing.

"Now, kid, how about the money?" Pooler Jim asked.

"Are you sure we're alone here interrogated Cicero, glancing guiltily about, as if fearful that some one would hear or see him in conversation with this man who he knew now must be a murderous rogue.

"Yes. This here's my den, this is. Look at them windows. I reckon it looks a little like a prison, don't it. You see, I've spent so much of my life in prison that I don't feel at home unless I've got bars across the windows," and he pointed, with a grim smile, to the windows, across which were heavy bars.

"Now, kid, what about the money?"

"Have you got the girl?"

"You bet."

"Where?"

"Right here in this house. Come, and I'll show her to you."

He led the way to another room, carrying as he went the candle which had been lighted when they first entered the apartment.

Unlocking a stout door, he half pushed Cicero forward.

Instantaneously, a small form darted forward from a far corner and grasped Pooler Jim by the arm, and at the same time the voice of the girl, Garnet, wailed:

"Oh, take me out—take me out! Don't keep me in here any longer!"

The beseeching voice reached Ben's ears.

He half started to his feet at the sound, with the impulse to dash forward and rescue the persecuted child.

"But 'tain't no use," he muttered, sinking back again. "What could I do against a man like Pooler Jim, all by myself? I'll just stay quiet and see what they're going to do. But if they undertake to harm her, durn my scats if I don't pitch in, no matter what happens!"

"Here, take your hands off me," growled Jim, surlily. "Have you kep' quiet since I was away?"

"Oh, yes, yes, I haven't made a sound. Take me out of here, won't you? I'm afraid to stay all alone in this dark room. And—and I'm so hungry."

"Well, I've brought you something to eat. Here," and he drew a large sandwich from his pocket, giving it to her.

Garnet was, in truth, about half starved. She seized upon the morsel greedily and ran off to one corner again, eating as if her life depended upon a hasty consumption of the bread and meat.

"Now, kid, let me talk a little business to you. Did you suppose that your offer of five hundred dollars was going to make me kill this little gal? Oh, no! It'll take a heap more money than that. Why, she's a fortune to anybody. And I and my pal, Bill Crook, mean to take her out West, into the towns, where we can make more money than you offer in a week—in every week that we 'show' her."

"I don't see anything particularly about her that she could bring in so much money just showing her," remarked Cicero, who was watching the girl with strange feelings of hate, because he knew that she was intended, by his father, to share in the Rugby wealth.

"Don't you? Then I'll show you something. Come here, gal."

Timidly Garnet came forward, her face plainly showing the fear in which she stood of the man.

Taking her by the arm, he drew out the skin to an extraordinary length from the surface, letting it go, and it returned to its normal condition with a perceptible snap.

Next he performed the same astonishing feat with the skin of the neck and even forced the child to bare a portion of her pure bosom, which, under his pulling touch, yielded the same remarkable exhibition of elasticity and to such an extent that he actually brought the skin up to her upper lip.

"Now I reckon you see, don't you, kid? This here's an elastic-skin gal. There's only two such people in the country to-day; the other's a man who's been going the rounds of the museums. Now, do you suppose that five hundred dollars'll pay me to kill such a gal as that?"

"Bu—bu—but I didn't say anything about killing her," broke in Cicero, with face a little blanched at the idea of murder.

"Oh, you didn't!" with a sneer. "And what did you mean, then?"

"Why, I only wanted her put out of the road."

"Of course. And that means you wanted her killed, else she'd interfere with the inheritance you expect to come into when your old pap kicks the bucket."

"Don't kill me! Don't kill me!" Garnet cried, with dilating orbs and whitened face.

"Shut up!" growled Jim, raising one hand as if to deal her a brutal blow.

The terrified child shrunk back.

"Is—there no other way?" put in Cicero, hesitatingly.

"Nary. If you want her out of the way, that means she must die, and there's no use mincing words over it."

Then he added, while the mind of Cicero seemed to recoil in silent horror from a contemplation of such a deed.

"Look here, you haven't got the money, anyhow, have you?"

"Not with me."

"That's what I thought. So I've hatched up another plan. It's ten to one that your old pap'll be offering a huge reward for the girl, and all I've got to do is to take her to him and gobble the aforesaid. Just as easy as mud, you see—"

"You mustn't do that," interrupted Cicero, suddenly starting into life again.

"Well, what am I to do then? You haven't got the money—and you won't have it. I've an idea that your pap has shut down on you for allowances."

"Yes, you've hit it. But I've just gone into a speculation. I'll soon have the money."

"A speculation? What, do you mean that banana business you're working with the boot-blacks?"

"Yes," with a wise nod.

Jim haw-hawed loudly.

"Why, kid, you couldn't raise that much money out of the boot-blacks if they gave you every dollar they earned to put into your banana speculation."

"Couldn't I? Why, I've got over forty dollars already, and that's only from one gang of them."

The news'll spread, and before a week goes by I'll have over a hundred."

"Take the profits out 'at you're going to pay," suggested Pooler Jim.

"Pooh! Do you take me for a fool? Why, I'll pay profits to those who demand it out of the investments of the others. And the great chances are that the additional inducement of the bigger dividend will keep all funds in instead of any being drawn out. I don't pay any profits. When I've got all I can, then I'll disappear. I guess nobody'll recognize me when I've changed my rig; none of 'em did to-night, and there was a lot of the same gang in front of the restaurant when I went in. No, I know my game. It's about the same as they do on Wall street. There won't be any profits, and I'll soon have enough to pay you what I promised."

"It'll take too much time," said Jim, with a dissatisfied shake of his head.

Then, after a pause, he added:

"Look here, suppose I suggest a way out of the difficulty—a way by which you get rid of the gal and I get all the money I want?"

"What is it?"

"Come back into the other room"—moving toward the door.

"Won't you please, please take me out of here?" sobbed the girl, as she saw them departing.

"No, and I warn you as I warned you before," replied Jim, with a savage frown, "if you make any noise, I'll come in here with a cart-whip and cut every inch of skin off your body, do you understand that?"

Garnet was presently left alone again in the secure and dark chamber that was her prison.

"Sit down and let's talk business," Jim said, when they had reached the first apartment, and shoving a stool toward his youthful companion.

"Now, I and my pal want to get out of Baltimore, and before we go we want to make a good haul."

"A haul?"

"Oh, don't play innocent. You know what I mean. I know that your old dad must keep a lot of money in the big safe he's got up stairs in his library—"

"Why, how did you know that he has a safe up there?" exclaimed Cicero, in astonishment.

"Well, I know it, that's all. Now, suppose you just arrange it so's we can get into the house after the folks are in bed, and if everything goes right and we get what money's in the safe—and I know there's some thousands—I'll promise to take the elastic skinned girl away to another country, where she'll never interfere with your inheritance—"

"I won't do it!" declared Cicero, decidedly, as he comprehended the suggestion of a bold burglary.

"You won't?"

"No, I won't."

"And I say you will!"

As Jim uttered the words, he rose from his seat and glowered down upon the youth threateningly.

CHAPTER VII.

A BURGLAR IN THE LIBRARY.

Young Cicero possessed some spirit.

At the authoritative words of Pooler Jim, he started to his feet, exclaiming:

"I don't think you can make me do what I don't want to do—you or anybody else."

"You don't, eh?" with a leer. "Well, if you don't do as I say, I'll just march the girl right up to your dad, to begin with; and I'll tell him that his son and heir offered me five hundred dollars to kill her. Then I'll hand you over to the law for receiving money under false pretenses—this fine scheme of the banana speculation of yours. How about it? I guess by the time you've been thoroughly ventilated, you'll get a cell over the falls, won't you?"

Cicero realized that he had jeopardized himself.

"Would you do that?"

"You don't know Pooler Jim, I reckon. Yes, I'd do it, every bit, and more, if I saw the chance. Come, I've got a claw on you, haven't I? Now, which'll it be: you do as I say, or you go over the falls for a term, or I'm mistaken."

"I guess I'll have to do it."

Cicero sunk dejectedly back upon his stool.

"That's sensible. Now, I'll tell you the plan—"

He paused, as a stealthy step was audible on the stairway.

"Somebody's coming," whispered Cicero, in a guilty tremble.

"It's only Bill Crook."

And in the next moment Bill Crook entered the room.

Before allowing the comer time to speak, Jim said:

"Take that boy down to the falls and toss him in. There's no mark on him; they'll think he fell overboard into the mud."

"All right."

Cicero averted his head.

He had witnessed what was apparently a murder, and the cool manner in which Jim dealt with it really shocked his soul although he was somewhat wicked himself at heart.

"It's that cussed bootblack," Bill remarked, as he proceeded to lift the lad from the floor.

"Yes, he won't trouble us any more, I reckon. Hurry with the job, Bill, and get back here! We're going to tap old Rugby's safe to-night, and here's the gay lark who is going to help us."

"I won't have any hand in it," said Cicero, emphatically. "If I can let you into the house, I'll do that much. But I won't do any more, if you send me to the jail or kill me for it—"

"Oh, we don't want you to even be around. You're too green, and you might spoil everything if you undertook too much. Hurry, Bill," as his confederate departed with Ben slung over his shoulder.

Bill Crook descended the unlighted stairs to a door at the rear which opened on West Falls avenue.

It was but a few steps to the murky gurgling filth of Jones Falls, into which he meant to cast the supposed dead body of our bootblack.

Ben made up his mind not to take any such dangerous plunge, however. He quietly waited, simulating unconsciousness, until they were clear of the house.

The locality after dark was always a deserted avenue; no one appeared in sight as Bill made his way toward the water.

But just as he was about to give the lad a swing that would have cast him into the mud and water, Ben became wonderfully imbued with life and activity.

With a suddenness that almost resulted in success, he made a squirming motion intended to release himself from the other's twining hold.

Bill, however, with an oath, tightened his hold.

"You cussed imp, why you ain't so dead after all. Jim didn't strike hard enough, I see."

And he raised his own burly fist, bringing it down upon Ben's head with a thump that brought a thousand stars into the lad's vision.

All seemed over for Ben then.

Limply he relaxed his struggles.

As his senses deserted him, a single thought glanced athwart his benumbed brain:

"I'm a goner! What'll poor mother do now?"

Bill Crook altered his intention of hurling the lad out into the sluggish stream. It might cause a splash and result in the finding of the body.

"I must make sure of him," he muttered. "It wouldn't do for him to be rescued and give an account of how he came there. Jim and I'd have the whole police force after us. So, now, my meddlesome bootblack, there you go—there you go!"—uttering the words lowly, slowly and calculatingly, as he eased the body over the wall, presently lying flat on his stomach and reaching downward, with a gripe on the boy's collar.

Down, down, slowly down went Ben, until at last Bill Crook released his hold on the collar, and the youthful form sunk into the black mud at the margin of the wall.

Crook could not see whether his victim had fallen into the water or the mud; but he had confidence in the blow he had dealt the lad before consigning him to the filthy grave.

"He won't ever come out of that," was his uttered thought, as he paused a moment to listen, "until they find him and decide at the inquest that he fell over and got suffocated in the mud."

At about the hour of ten on the same night the servitors at the Rugby mansion were a little surprised to see Master Cicero enter the house by the rear basement way.

A very unusual proceeding for the wealthy gentleman's son.

"Is my father home?" he asked of one.

"Yes, sir; he's up in the parlor."

"Well, I don't want to see him. I've just got in from Wilmington. I'd started to go to Philadelphia, but changed my mind."

"Yes, I heard 'at you'd gone off for Philadelphia," half-interrupted the man.

"I changed my mind. And I'm awful tired

with so much traveling. I'm going up to bed. You needn't say anything about my coming back, remember."

"All right, sir."

"Because I'm not in the humor of talking," he added.

"Yes, sir."

Cicero sought his room on the second floor.

But not to retire; neither did he disrobe himself at all.

Those who saw him when he entered, passing through the hall beside the kitchen, observed that he looked very pale.

But they attributed it to fatigue, occasioned by his supposed trip as far as Wilmington.

In his room this pallor increased.

He removed his gaiters and stepped to the door.

Satisfying himself that nobody was astir in the upper portion of the mansion, he stole forth and descended noiselessly to the library.

A dim light always burned in the library.

Crossing to a veranda-like window, outside of which was a rail reaching about two feet above the sill, he glanced forth into the starry night.

There was a light tap on the pane.

He raised the sash.

"Hush!" he warned. "I don't know what minute somebody might come in here—"

"Who's gabblin' but you. Shut up!" returned the voice of Bill Crook, as that worthy swung himself inside.

And he added:

"Now you just light out—git. I'll attend to the balance."

With white face and nerves in a tremble, Cicero went out from the library, seeking again his bedroom in the far end of the passage.

Locking the door, he went to the mirror and took a good look at himself, running his fingers through his hair with a spasmodic movement.

"My goodness!" burst from his half livid lips.

"I'm a sight! I believe I feel as a murderer must feel! Here I'm a party to a burglary, and all through my being so fresh in getting in with those crooks. They've got me, sure. I couldn't get out of it. But I must try and look on the good side of it. I am not the one who's breaking into the safe. And they'll place the girl where she'll never turn up to rob me of the share of the inheritance which'll be mine when the old man dies. I made Jim promise that he wouldn't murder her, though. I'm not as bad as that. Why, he seemed to think I meant to have her murdered from the first; and I'd never thought of such a thing as that—no! Hark! somebody is coming up the stairs."

He hastened to the door and stood like a pale statue, listening to a sound of footsteps in the hall without.

"It's father. I hope he won't go into the library."

While this scene was transpiring, Thomas Rugby had been seated in his comfortable parlor, amid his surroundings of luxury, talking with his wife.

Thomas was a man of years, with grizzled hair and a cast of countenance which might reasonably have caused Cicero to think that it would not be long before he would be able to handle the old man's wealth.

His wife was a woman of peculiarly saturnine countenance.

"I dislike to give up the attempt to find the girl," he remarked.

"The girl?"

"Yes, Garnet, you know—"

"That girl! I thought that you had arrived at the conclusion that you should show yourself possessed of more sense, Thomas, than to bother about her. The idea of making such a fuss about that thing!"

"Not a 'thing,' Mariah. Remember, if it had not been for Samuel Fawnworth, Thomas Rugby would not now be what he is."

"Pooh! Well, the girl's father died long ago, and you are what you are—thanks to nobody. Let her go, since she has disappeared. It isn't your place, I warrant, to be looking her up."

His face twitched a little.

Some inward thought was annoying him deeply.

"I can't altogether do that, Mariah. I really want to find the girl if I can. I sent word to the marshal's office—the police marshal—that if she could be found I would pay any reasonable amount for the trouble of the detectives—"

"And that's a good way to waste money. How long since this mood of charity struck in on you, Thomas Rugby. You're afflicted badly with it. I don't care to see my son, our son, sharing his inheritance with a nobody, mind that—supposing he may survive you. Haven't I helped you to accumulate, with the sum you

had at first, until now you are one of the wealthy men of Baltimore? Are you going to make a fool of yourself"—leaning forward as she uttered the words sharply—"in your old age, Thomas? Let the girl go, I say, and be glad of the riddance. I'd be glad if she was under the sod, where she'll never bother any—"

"Hush, Mariah! You must not talk that way. You're wishing awful things."

"No matter if I am. And I won't talk any more about the wail."

Mrs. Rugby started from her chair and left the room.

No love in her heart was there for the orphan and friendless Garnet—the girl who had been expected to come into their home as a sharer of the wealth which she, who doted on her own son, believed should all belong to that son.

And the fact that Thomas Rugby had resolved to make a portion of his will in favor of the girl, was an enigma to her; more, it was an act which she meant to combat in the courts if matters went that far.

"If she only knew the whole truth," muttered Thomas, when alone. "I am getting very old, and somehow, I can't refuse the dying request of the woman who was the wife of the man I know I so deeply wronged. The world does not know it—the world never will know it until I am dead; but my own heart knows and shrinks at thought of it. I'm afraid I've taught the lesson of money-making and saving too well to Mariah. In my will there is also a paper for the child, Garnet, to read when she is old enough to comprehend, and maybe my act of restitution to her will cause her to do me justice in her own mind when I am laid away. Well, it's getting late. I'll go to bed."

Extinguishing the light in parlor and hall himself, he ascended the stairs.

At the landing above, he seemed suddenly possessed of an idea.

He turned aside and entered the library.

In one corner stood a large safe of the Miller patent.

Advancing to this, after raising the gas jet, he opened the massive door and drew forth a package of papers.

The topmost of the papers bore a legend that told the document to be: The Last Will and Testament of Thomas Rugby.

He grasped the end of this paper and was about to draw it from the package, when he made a startling discovery.

CHAPTER VIII.

CICERO IS STARTLED BY AN APPARITION.

A MAN was behind the safe!

This intruder, Bill Crook, saw that he was discovered.

Ere the old gentleman could make any outcry, or even rise from the stooping position in which he was when he had drawn the papers from the safe, Crook was upon him.

Like a vise the fingers of the burglar closed upon the other's windpipe.

A struggle ensued; but Thomas Rugby was no match for this stalwart villain. In less than three seconds he was hurled over on his back on the carpet, with his scowling adversary above him.

And tighter still those merciless fingers on the windpipe.

"Struggle, you old gray-haired fool! And the more you struggle, the better your chances are for being strangled, you hear me!" hissed Crook, glaring down upon his victim.

"You've saved me a heap o' trouble by comin' in here, 'cause I couldn't open the durned thing, even with my tools."

"Don't murder me," Rugby managed to gasp.

"I don't want to, but if I must, well, then, I must. Lay still there, now," and he accompanied the words by a blow that caused Rugby's eyes to close and a deathly pallor to spread over his aged face.

Starting up, with a grasp like the swoop of an eagle, Bill Crook thrust his hands into the safe. Several packages of greenbacks had he seen there, even in the midst of his struggle with the old gentleman.

Into capacious pockets he stowed the money, giving only one glance over his shoulder during the operation to see that the man he had strangled was not returning to consciousness.

The task of robbery did not consume more than twenty seconds. Turning from his burglarious work, he stooped to gaze into the face of the man on the floor. Not a muscle twitched; the hue of death itself was over the countenance.

Then from his lips came the words, scarcely above a whisper:

"I do believe I've killed him! I didn't mean to. But, it can't be helped now. I reckon Pooler Jim and I've got enough money now, even without the girl—for these packages all bear a 'C' mark on top. A pretty good haul! Now to be out of this!"

He hastened to the window and swung himself outward.

A low whistle greeted him from below.

"How is it?" interrogated the voice of Pooler Jim from the darkness.

"O. K."

"Any damage done?" as Bill reached the ground by means of a hooked rope that dangled from the rail.

"Had to kill the old man, I guess. Strangled him some, and he's laid out up there."

Pooler Jim uttered an oath of vexation.

"Wasn't there any other way but that?"

"Didn't strike me that there was. Come, we'd better be scarce 'round here, I'm thinking."

The evil pair slunk rapidly across the garden and out to the street.

At a distance of not more than twenty paces from the gate they met and passed a policeman who came sauntering leisurely along and who eyed them a little suspiciously.

But they got off safely with the booty that Bill Crook carried in his pockets.

Meantime silence like the silence of the tomb reigned within the Rugby mansion.

On the edge of a chair in his bedroom sat Cicero Rugby.

A startled look was in his face.

"I can't stay here!" he exclaimed, presently, in a gaspy way. "I must know what they've done—I must. And if I'm rid of them, I swear I'll never have anything to do with their like again. I didn't expect to get into any such tangle as this."

He stepped out into the hall, where everything was so hushed, and moved in his stocking feet toward the library.

As he came near to the apartment, he saw that the door was open.

"Father must have gone in there," he thought, continuing to advance. "I hope he didn't meet the man Pooler Jim sent to commit the burglary."

Then, as he reached the threshold, there passed over his frame an icy shiver that paralyzed him for a moment, and his eyes distended in veriest horror.

There on the floor lay the body of his father, in all the semblance of a violent death—violent because he realized that it must have been caused by an encounter with Bill Crook.

Mechanically he hastened forward and bent over the motionless figure, gazing down upon it with an expression of unbounded fright.

"Good Heaven!" burst from him, though so lowly that he could scarcely hear his own words. "They've killed my father!"

Then his eyes rested upon the package of papers.

And as if Satan was determined to draw the youth further into the slough of crime which he had here entered through his collusion with the thieves, the uppermost paper was the will with its bold, plain writing of indorsement which showed its character.

He reached and took it, murmuring:

"It is the will my father made last—the one in which he gives to Garnet Fawnworth an equal share with me in his property. And now he is dead!"

His fingers closed over the document.

He cast a hurried glance around.

Then he almost ran from the library back along the hall toward his bedroom.

Locking himself in here, he gazed again, with wide and guilty eyes, upon the paper he had snatched, as he believed, from the fingers of his dead father.

Then a mantle of red dyed his cheeks.

"It is mine!" he exclaimed. "I'll destroy it, and that will be the end of Garnet Fawnworth. The whole estate will be mine after mother's share. I didn't kill him—I didn't kill him! No!"

But he could not quiet his conscience.

The air around him seemed suddenly alive with hauntings.

There were blue lines coming around his mouth.

Without extinguishing the gas he threw himself upon his bed and lay with wide eyes, staring at the wall.

And thus he lay when daylight came and he heard the servants bustling about busily.

"They'll find it—they'll find it presently," he mumbled, shiveringly. "I must take time and be calm over it. I didn't do it. What am I so afraid for? I didn't kill my father—no!"

But, much to his surprise, there did not sound any sudden alarm, indicate that the dead body of his father had been discovered by the horrified servants.

"It's mighty singular," he muttered, rising from his sleepless couch in something like impatience. "They surely ought to have discovered the dead body by this time."

He arranged his toilet, and at its completion tucked the stolen will inside his coat pocket.

When through with the task, he flattered himself that his appearance did not contain anything likely to attract suspicion toward himself in connection with the tragic occurrence of the night gone.

With a final effort to set his nerves steadily, he went forth from his room and descended the stairs.

Everything seemed as usual; there was not the least excitement visible in the demeanor of the chambermaid, whom he met at the landing as he descended the stairs.

As he passed downward, he noticed that the library door was closed; but he thought that he had closed the door himself when fleeing from it with the valuable will in his possession.

"Your father would like to see you, Master Rugby," broke in the voice of the hall servant, as he reached the bottom of the staircase.

And so sudden was the speech, and so strange, under the circumstance of his excited thoughts, that he started and half-recolled, as if he had been invited to look upon the ghastly corpse of Thomas Rugby.

"My father?" he half-gasped.

"Yes. He's in his bedroom. And he sent word, or your mother did, that you had better come to him as soon as you were up. Some one of the girls told your mother that you'd come back, Master Cicero—I didn't."

Hardly aware of his own movements, so utterly dazed was the youth by this message from one whom he believed to be dead, he turned and ascended the stairs to his father's room.

Thomas Rugby lay in bed. Mrs. Rugby was by his side.

"Cicero," said his mother, "close the door. Come here. Something extraordinary has happened. I went to bed last night and waited for your father until I was tired. Then I got up and went in search of him. I found him on the floor in the library, and he was unable to speak a word to tell what had transpired. He seems to be paralyzed; he can't speak a word. I don't know what to make of it. And the safe was open. Do you know whether your father had any money in the safe, Cicero? I have kept the remarkable thing quiet; I don't want the servants to know. But I'm all perplexed. I can't make anything out of it, and your father can't tell anything. What shall I do?—send for a doctor?"

Cicero was very pale as he gazed into the aged face on the pillow. There was something in his father's face that seemed to search into his very soul—and such a change in that face! It was truly ghastly; only the eyes, the small and burning eyes, seemed to retain their life, and these were upon him in a way that almost seemed to say:

"I know all, my son!"

"Why, of course, mother—send for a doctor. What in the world can it all mean?"

The burning eyes of Thomas Rugby were fastened upon him so intently that the young scion could not sustain their look.

But Rugby made no sound, made no motion. He seemed to be, as Mariah Rugby had stated, paralyzed in limb and tongue.

Cicero hastened after a doctor in person.

"Not dead!" he muttered, as he went. "What if he was only semi-conscious and knows of my coming into the library and taking the will? I almost wish now that Bill Crook had been more sure with his work—" But even as the heartless wish entered his brain, he shuddered at his own thoughts.

The office of the physician was not far from the mansion.

Cicero found the man of medicine in, and his account of his father's condition caused the doctor to hasten to the Rugby home without delay.

Cicero did not accompany the doctor.

After leaving the office, he held back until the other had driven off in his gig, then, by a roundabout way, he started homeward.

As he came near the house, something happened to send a thrill through every fiber of his frame.

On the opposite side of the broad thoroughfare, beyond the reservation near the Peabody

Institute, were two persons who evidently had their gaze fixed upon him.

One was a man—a stranger.

The other was a boy of about his own age.

And the latter was no less a person than our bootblack, Ben Brush.

Ben was pointing straight with one finger at the young scion.

And any one standing close enough might have heard the boy say to his older companion:

"There he is, Mr. Grip! That's the same boy I saw in the house on Concord street with Pooler Jim last night. And if I'd only met you sooner, I might have saved his father's house from being robbed. It's been robbed, as I reckon you'll find out before long; 'cause he was to let the burglars in—I heard him make the bargain with them."

The man was Jack Grip, the detective.

Cicero averted his head slightly, so as not to let the pair know he was aware of their presence.

But the apparition of the bootblack was like a ghostly warning to him that he was soon to be in a terrible trouble.

He surely thought that the bootblack was killed by Pooler Jim, and afterward tossed into Jones Falls by Jim's pal, Bill Crook.

Within the mansion, the doctor was making a very sensational announcement at the bedside of Thomas Rugby.

"He cannot possibly survive, madam," to Mrs. Rugby. "It is a severe case of paralysis, and of a kind that a second stroke may be expected at any moment. When it comes, he must die. It's very plain talk—but it is sometimes better to be plain. The only pity is that he cannot give some explanation of what occurred last night."

Astonishingly to all at that moment, Rugby made a sign that was easily interpreted as meaning that he wanted pencil and paper.

CHAPTER IX.

BOOTBLACK BEN, DETECTIVE!

PROVIDENCE was especially good to the bootblack, Ben Brush.

The manner in which he was lowered over the wall at Jones Falls by his would-be murderer, brought him feet-first in contact with the soft mud that had accumulated at the base of the masonry.

Mercifully for him—because instantly the mud began to engulf him like a quicksand—he was not long in that unconscious state produced by the terrible blow which Bill Crook had dealt him upon the head.

Already he had sunk in as deep as his knees, and was sinking deeper in the oozy bed, when he regained his senses and, with an instinctive motion, reached outward to grasp at the jagged sides of the stone wall.

For some minutes he remained thus, to more fully recover himself; and as he clung, there was a painful throbbing in his bruised head, caused by the first and the second blows he had received from his enemies.

"I don't think I'm dead yet, though, by a good sight," he articulated, faintly, while his aching eyes strained upward in the gloom at the hazy sky.

With the recovery of consciousness came the alertness that told him he must exercise to protect himself from further assault.

His would-be assassin might then be not far off, watching to smite him again if he gave any indication of being able to extricate himself from the muddy depths.

And all the while the sucking mud around his limbs seemed to be resisting the attempt to release the contemplated victim.

The very bones in his legs began to twitch and ache under the strain.

Fully an hour went by; and at last the boy resolved that he would take any possible chance that might be lingering above in the gloom beyond the wall.

Slowly he dragged himself upward.

It was not a difficult task to gain the broad top of the wall, by means of the unfinished projections.

When he gained a sitting posture thereon, he looked about him for a glimpse of his recent foe.

"I'm left for dead, I reckon. And what have they been doing with poor little Garnet all this time? I wonder how long I was laying down there in the mud," feeling downward upon his bedraggled garments.

"Hello, there! what're you doing there?"

The gruff voice of a policeman broke in upon him.

"On'y waitin' for strength enough to get away, that's all."

"Have you been overboard?"

"That's about the size of it."

The shrewd boy was not going into any explanations. He preferred to pocket his experience rather than set anybody on the trail he was now resolved to pursue to its very end, for the double motive of revenge upon his enemies and the rescue of Garnet Fawnworth.

"Well, you lads shouldn't be skylarkin' so much round the factories hereabouts. Move on, now, if you're able."

"I guess I can walk. You needn't shove me." He hurried away as fast as he could.

At the first lamp he paused to take a look at his condition.

"Great Goshen!" he exclaimed. "Well, I'm a sight, an' that's a fact. I don't care, though. I'm bound to see Mr. Grip."

He started on again, making toward Baltimore street.

It was his intention to seek the detective at the marshal's office—for he knew that Mr. Grip was frequently there at a late hour in the night. A disappointment was in store.

Mr. Grip was out; no one knew where he could be found or when he might return.

"I'll wait for him then," announced Ben, determinedly.

"You must have something important on hand," queried the clerk, who was just then alone in the office.

"I have."

"What like?"

"That's telling."

"You'd better wait outside— Don't sit down on that bench, there; you'll fill it full of mud. Why, you're as dirty as if you'd been dipped into the falls—"

"And that's just what's the matter with me."

"What's Mr. Grip got to do with it?"

"So much that I reckon if I tell him you was trying to pump me about some business of his, you'll get your walkin'-papers in a hurry, and don't you forget that."

This had the effect of silencing the clerk.

He asked the boy no more questions.

Ben settled himself for a "wait" if it took all night.

And pretty near all through the night had he to wait; for it was nearly two o'clock in the morning before Mr. Grip showed himself in the office.

He was considerably surprised at finding Ben there.

"Why, hello! what's up with you, Ben?"

"I want to see you in private on business, Mr. Grip."

"All right." And to the clerk: "Dick, step around to the coffee-house and bring us two lunches. You're hungry, are you not, Ben? And, Dick, you can stop long enough to eat a lunch yourself."

When alone with Ben, he asked:

"What became of you to-night?"

"When?"

"When you were hanging on to the trunk-board of the hack containing Pooler Jim and the young man."

"Did you see me?"

"Of course I did. I was shadowing Pooler Jim. But they were too much for me after all. I tracked them to a house on Concord street. I entered the house about twelve o'clock, under the impression that I might find the girl there—the one we're after, you know—"

"And there's where she is," said Ben, breaking in.

"Oh, no, you're mistaken."

"But I'm not. I saw her, and I heard her begging for her life."

"Begging for her life! This is getting serious. Why, I went all over the house, and not a thing could I find either of the girl or Pooler Jim."

"But she's in there; and the chances are, Mr. Grip, that Pooler Jim and the other man have committed a bold robbery by this time and are out of the city," and the lad went on to relate all that he had heard pass between those in the Concord street house, including the almost fatal mishaps to himself at the hands of Pooler Jim and his pal, Bill Crook.

"A pretty close shave that, Ben. But the girl is no longer in the house, neither is Pooler Jim."

"An' what about the burglary I've been telling you was planned when they thought I was dead?"

Grip looked at his watch.

"If it was really to be carried out at all, it is probably accomplished ere this. All I can do now is to look up Pooler Jim. And I want your assistance, Ben; I believe you're a shrewd lad."

"Do you, Mr. Grip?" the boy exclaimed in delight.

"Yes. But go home now and change your clothes and get a nap. Come here early in the morning. By the by—" pausing and drawing a revolver from his pocket, which he handed to the boy.

"What's that for?"

"You'd better carry it. The men, Pooler Jim and Bill Crook, may be on the lookout to make sure of your death, since you will be an important witness against them when I catch them."

"You feel sure that you'll catch them?"

"Certainly I do. Be off now, and come, as I say, early in the morning."

Ben hurried away to his home.

Mrs. Brush, in a high state of anxiety concerning the whereabouts of her son, was still sitting up when he entered.

"Ben, my dear son, where in the world have you been?" embracing him solicitously.

"Playing detective, mother—"

She interrupted with a little startled cry:

"What's the matter with your head, Ben? It's all swollen on one side."

"I got hurt, mother; but it don't amount to much. There, I must go to bed and get some sleep. I've got to start out with Mr. Grip in the morning to find Garnet. Oh, I've been appointed a regular detective, under Mr. Grip—"

"Look at your clothes! Have you been overboard, Ben?"

"Yes, and pretty near drowned. But I'm all right now, or I'm nearly dead for some sleep, that's all."

He retired to his bedroom and began to disrobe, taking the revolver first from his pocket and depositing it on the mantle-piece.

A low cry from the doorway attracted him.

Mrs. Brush was standing there, and she had seen the gleaming weapon in her son's hand with a thrill of horror.

"Ben, for goodness sake! Tell me, my son, what all this means? What are you doing with a pistol?"

"Don't I tell you, mother, I've been appointed a detective? All detectives carry pistols. Don't worry; I'm all right. We're going to find Garnet. Good-night!" and he tumbled into his cot to snatch what little sleep he could between that late hour and daylight.

Bright and early he was up, and took hastily the cup of coffee that was prepared for him.

Attired in his best suit and feeling very proud of himself, he sought the marshal's office.

Mr. Grip was there, apparently waiting for him.

"Come with me," he said to the lad, leading him from the office. "I'll tell you what I have been doing while you were asleep, and I'll tell you what I want you to do. Pooler Jim is still in town. He hasn't been to bed all night, either, but drinking like a fish at a saloon on Bath street. I felt pretty sure I could spot him in the 'Meadow.' Wherever Pooler Jim is, there's where we'll find the elastic-skinned girl. There's no account in the *Sun* this morning of any robbery. I have inserted this advertisement, though," handing Ben a paper.

The lad read, to himself:

"WARNING."

"Managers of museums throughout the country are hereby warned not to negotiate with any person or persons offering, as agents, for exhibition, a child known as the elastic-skinned girl. Any person knowing aught of such a phenomenon will be rewarded by communicating with the Police Marshal of Baltimore and retaining in custody any persons who may have possession of such a child. Papers of other cities please copy."

"I reckon that'll be a pretty costly advertisement," remarked Ben, returning the paper.

"It is done under authority from Thomas Rugby, who communicated with the marshal yesterday afternoon."

"And what is it you want me to do, Mr. Grip?" he asked, as he perceived that they were nearing Mount Vernon Place.

"I want you to point out to me the youth known as Cicero."

"Cicero?"

"The one you said was in collusion with Pooler Jim in connection with the contemplated robbery."

Hardly had the detective uttered the words, when Cicero himself, just then returning from his hasty call at the doctor's office, came in sight around a near corner.

Instantly Ben pointed, saying:

"There he is, Mr. Grip. That's the same boy I saw in the house on Concord street with Pooler Jim!"

"That will do. Do you know who it is?"

"No."

"Well, it's the son of the old man—Cicero Rugby. Now, Ben, go to the saloon on Bath street and watch Pooler Jim—for unless I'm very much mistaken, you'll find him there still drinking. If he has been up to a burglary—and we'll soon know if such is the case—he is acting like a fool; for when he gets full of liquor, the chances are that he will give himself dead away—"

"I'll be off at once—" making as if to start across the street.

But Grip detained him.

"Oh, no, not in that rig."

"Why?"

"Come with me and put on a disguise."

An hour later, Bootblack Ben was at the saloon on Bath street in the full rig of a bootblack; but his face was black as midnight, and he looked for all the world to be the veriest negro who ever went down on knees to polish a boot.

CHAPTER X.

BEN MAKES A FAILURE.

DEVIOUS and treacherous are the environs of the "Meadow."

White and black live and mingle there in a curious and somewhat questionable anomaly.

The saloon into which Ben soon worked his way in his bootblackening vocation, was a den of the lowest kind, presided over by a man of the lowest specimen.

The air was suffocatingly pregnant with rum.

But it would seem that many of the frequenters of the place had ways—perhaps very dark ways—for supplying themselves with money, as Ben observed that there was very little of the "trusting" business done at the counter.

"What would mother think, I wonder," passed in the lad's mind, "if she knew I was in such a place?"

At one side, about the worst intoxicated and profane among the motley gang, was the quarry.

Pooler Jim, with his fashionable suit bedabbled and his face flushed with the potations he had partaken of freely.

"Here, shine my boots!" he growled, as he tipsily regarded the negro bootblack.

Ben proceeded to the task.

But hardly had he finished on one boot, when something startling transpired.

A faint scream of some one in distress penetrated to the dingy bar-room.

It had an immediate and partly sobering effect on Pooler Jim; for without waiting to say a word to the bootblack, he sprung from his chair and lurched off in the direction of the room at the rear.

In a far corner of the room was the girl, Garnet!

Over her towered a virago with a strap in her hand, and by the attitude of the two, it was evident that the woman had just administered a brutal stroke upon the child.

"What's the row here, hey?" demanded Jim.

"Why, the thing was pretty near getting away, that's what," replied the hag. "I caught her in time though, an' I guess she won't try it again," pointing to a great welt which the strap had raised on Garnet's pure shoulder.

"Oh, sir!" she screamed imploringly, to Pooler Jim. "Don't let her kill me. Yes, I was trying to get away. It's so awful here; I can hear the men swearing up in the little room where you put me, and I was afraid God would visit a judgment upon the house while I was in it—"

"Here, you get back to your room," he broke in, harshly, and grasping her roughly by the arm.

As he did this, the girl's skin stretched outward, revealing the wonderful phenomenon of her person.

The hag gazed upon it with wide eyes.

"Say, what kind of a girl is that?"

"None of your business. Come," to Garnet, and pushing her toward the greasy stairs.

"I'm the gutta-percha girl! He's carrying me away to make a show of me! Save me from him! Save me!" screamed Garnet.

Jim slammed shut the door on the stairs and then half carried her upward.

Thrusting her into the foul-smelling room which was another prison provided by her abductor, he uttered a fierce oath, adding:

"If you try to get out of here again I'll cut your head off with this, do you hear me?" and he flourished a long knife before the eyes of the terrified child.

The fat and red-nosed barkeeper was busy with his drunken customers, when his wife came to his side, saying:

"Slack!"

"Well, what's up?"

"We've got a fortune in the house."

"Will have, you mean, if these fools keep on spending money with me like they have for the past year."

"I don't mean that."

"What then?"

"Have you seen the paper to-day?"

"Ain't had no time—too busy," he grunted.

He cared nothing for daily papers; he only thought of money to be made by selling rum.

From her pocket his wife produced the *Sun* and pointed out the advertisement that Grip had shown to Ben.

"Well, what about it?" after reading it.

"Do you mind, there's a reward for the girl?"

"Yes."

"We've got her."

"Got her! What are you a-talking about, old woman?"

"The girl's in the house, up-stairs. If we give her up to the police, we'll get the reward."

He stared at her in astonishment.

"You don't mean the gal Pooler Jim brought here last night?"

"That's just who I mean."

"Enough said."

"Will we do it?"

"Squeal on Jim? Cert—or anybody else 'at I kin make dollars out of. Wait till Jim comes back, an' I'll keep him busy while you go for a policeman."

Pooler Jim presently re-entered the bar-room.

While he was taking another drink, a man came in at the door that opened into the yard.

"Look here," said the voice of Bill Crook, sharply, though in an undertone. "You're throwing the whole thing away. Where's your eyes, eh?"

"What's the matter, Bill?"

"Come, an' I'll show you. The detectives are right on top of us, an' in broad daylight they're about to take the girl from under your nose."

"No!"

Jim grew still more sober now.

He followed his pal out into the yard, making no noise at a sign from the latter.

"Look," said Bill Crook, briefly, and raising a finger to indicate the grape-rack which extended from the fence of the yard in an embowering trellis across to the windows of the second story.

There he saw, crawling cautiously along, with the intention of reaching one of the windows, the identical bootblack who had but a few moments before been working on his boots.

From their position the crawling lad was in plain view, while he could not see the evil pair who now watched him with glaring orbs.

At a sign from Pooler Jim, they withdrew back again to the house. The barkeeper—who knew that his wife had gone for a policeman—endeavored to attract Pooler Jim by the offer of a treat.

But the now nearly wholly sobered schemer paid him no heed, ascending on tip-toe to the second story, accompanied by his partner in guilt.

"We'll give that boy a surprise, whoever he is, 'at he won't forget in a hurry."

And then he asked, as if with an inspiration:

"Are you sure you dropped that cussed little bootblack into the falls last night?"

"Of course I am, an' gave him another whack over the head into the bargain. Why?"

"Oh, nothin', only somehow, it came into my head that this might be the same one."

"This is a nigger."

Before the door of the room where Garnet was confined, Jim stooped and peered in through the keyhole.

The window being opposite the door, he could see the bootblack gradually gaining the sill; and more, Garnet had evidently been attracted by some sign or call from the lad, for she was standing at the window, and there was a hopeful light in her childish face.

It had never struck the child that she might have effected her escape by the same means this boy was now adopting to get to her side.

"Don't make any noise, Garnet," presently said the voice of Bootblack Ben—and the sound sent a thrill into her young heart, for she instantly recognized the speaker, notwithstanding his disguise of the blackened face.

"Oh, is it you for true, Ben Brush?"

"Yes, it's Ben Brush. And I'm going to get you out of that if you're brave enough."

"I'm brave enough for anything to get me out of this horrid place and away from the bad men."

Ben had reached the sill, on which he sat down to draw a breath of rest.

His idea was to take the girl over the rack; but he realized, after his own exertions, that it would be a perilous task for her.

"Cheer up," he said. "I'll soon get you out of this and into the hands of your friends—your true friends. I had to black my face this way to get in here without Pooler Jim knowing who I was. He tried hard to kill me last night. Wait till I'm sure there isn't anybody out in the yard, then we'll chance it."

There was an interruption.

The door swung open, striking the wall with a loud bang.

Into the room rushed Pooler Jim and Bill Crook, the former flourishing the murderous-looking knife which had so frightened Garnet.

"I reckon we'll spoil that little game," he cried, with an oath that was echoed by Crook.

Ben sprang upright on the sill.

Quick as lightning he whipped out the revolver he had received from Jack Grip, and his voice rung defiantly.

"Reckon I'm a-holdin' the fort! Stand back, Pooler Jim, if you don't want a hole bored through you!"

A tableau!

The two villains halted before the muzzle of the weapon.

Garnet uttered a shrill shriek, for she expected to see the boy shoot them down at once.

At that instant there was a sound of footsteps in the yard.

Ben could see, without removing his defiant glance from the pair of ruffians, that a policeman had entered the yard, accompanied by the wife of the saloon-keeper.

"I've got you!" he cried, in triumph. "Here's a policeman down in the yard; and I'll soon have you fellers behind the bars—"

Bill Crook was behind Pooler Jim.

If the revolver was discharged, he knew that the bullet would strike Pooler Jim and not him.

With a quick and adroit movement, he reached and grasped up the three-legged stool that happened to be close at hand.

Then over the shoulder of Jim he hurled it at the daring lad.

The aim was a true one.

The revolver exploded, its bullet thudding into the ceiling.

The force of the blow from the stool broke the boy's gripe on the lower part of the raised sash.

And another cry escaped from the lips of the cowering Garnet, as she saw her champion go headlong downward through the rack!

"Quick!" exclaimed Jim, darting forward and grasping the girl by the arm. "Somebody is coming—maybe a policeman, as the rascal said. He's got help close, no doubt. Out of this. Follow me!"

Smothering the child's mouth with one of his brawny hands, to prevent any further outcry, he started on a run along the narrow entry toward the rear of the premises.

Bill paused to close and lock the door between the front and back building, and he heard voices on the stairs that convinced him the comers were after the girl.

"She's right up there," said the voice of the saloon-keeper's wife, "and the chances are Pooler Jim's killed her, having found out we're coming after her. Did you hear the shot? I heard him say 'at he'd kill her before he'd let her go. Oh, it's the elastic-skinned girl, an' no mistake. She's up there—but maybe dead by this time. Hurry—for I've got a right to the reward, an' I'm going to have it, I am."

Crook hastened after his companion.

"What did you hear?" Jim asked, pausing for the other to come up, and still keeping his suffocating hand over his captive's mouth.

"It's a dead give 'way."

"Who did it? Wasn't the policeman with the boy?"

"No, the woman, Slack's wife, tumbled to the racket about the elastic-skinned gal, an' started out for a policeman. She's after the reward—"

"Reward?"

"Yes. The detectives are offering a reward for the gal. It was in the paper this morning, but you were too drunk to read it."

"I'll settle with Slack's wife for that," said Pooler Jim, with an ominous scowl. "Come."

CHAPTER XI.

EXPOSING A YOUNG SWINDLER.

AGAIN was Providence with the daring bootblack.

As he went pitching from the window-sill, he had presence of mind enough to make a grasp

at the cross-piece of the rack through which he was falling, and succeeded.

But the force of his descent was so great that he could not sustain himself.

His arms were nearly wrenched from their sockets.

It had the effect of turning him over, however, and when he struck the pave below, at a distance of not more than twelve feet, he alighted on his feet with no other injury than an uncomfortable jar of his every muscle and bone.

Quickly he darted into the house and up the back stairs.

He reached the threshold of the room where Garnet had been imprisoned, just as the policeman was saying:

"I don't see any girl, ma'am."

"But she was in here a moment ago, I tell you!" cried the bag. "Look for her! She's somewhere around! Pooler Jim's got her out while we were coming up here. He can't be far."

Ben did not stop to hear all that she said.

Instantly he dashed toward the door between the front and back buildings.

The lock was not of the strongest, and the impetus of the boy's form, as it came hurling forward, broke the fastenings, precipitating him downward over the single step there.

Away he went toward the rear.

Something seemed to spur him on.

He felt sure that he was following the right lead.

And as he emerged at the top of a flight of exterior steps at the back of the house, high up, he was just in time to see his quarry disappearing out at the alley-way in a light-wagon, which Bill Crook had brought there at the time he saw him enter the bar-room to warn his associate in guilt of the closeness of those who sought the rescue of the elastic-skinned girl.

He saw them over the top of the high fence; and when he ran with all speed to the gate, he found this barricaded by some huge barrels on the outside, making it necessary for him to climb the fence if he wanted to pursue.

This he did, accomplishing it nimbly.

But by that time the wagon with the girl captive had disappeared, and upon reaching the street, he could not follow the trail further, though he made excited inquiries of several who chanced to be passing.

"Well, that's too bad!" he burst forth. "I was almost on the point of saving her, when, instead, I had a narrow escape, I think, from dashing out my brains on the cobbles in that den."

"What's too bad, Ben?"

So engrossed was he with straining his eyes in one direction at the time for a glimpse of the wagon containing Garnet, that he did not observe the approach of a man until the latter spoke.

"Mr. Grip! Why, I say it's a shame."

"What?"

"I was just going to get the girl out of the claws of those fellows, when the whole tables were turned on me," and he proceeded to relate his narrow escape.

"So she was in the house, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, we'll catch them easier, now."

"How?"

"They were in a wagon, you say?"

"Yes," and he accurately described the wagon as far as he could from the point of observation he had had from the top of the outside flight of steps.

While he was doing this, Grip was writing rapidly.

He presently folded a slip of paper, giving it to Ben, and saying:

"Run up to the northeastern station with that, and tell the captain to telegraph it around without delay. Unless I'm very much mistaken, they'll try to get out of town by the Bel Air road, and we'll head them off. After that, I want you to hunt up the youth, Cicero. He's disappeared, and I want him pretty badly just now."

"Anything new?" Ben could not help pausing to ask.

"The robbery was committed at the Rugby mansion. More, too, the old man received injuries—probably in a struggle with the burglar—which resulted in his death about thirty minutes ago. Before he died, he called for pencil and paper, by signs—for he could not speak—and he made a revelation that will make it go pretty hard with this Cicero when I catch him. But he has disappeared most unaccountably."

"I reckon I can find him," said Ben, confidently.

Grip had learned through the physician who had been called in to attend the singularly stricken Rugby, that quite a large burglary had been committed at the mansion on the previous night.

Rugby had encountered the burglar and after a desperate struggle with him had been left for dead.

In a transient moment before death ensued, his faculties had returned, but not his power of speech.

He had called for pencil and paper, and with this medium had communicated the fact that while he lay in a half-conscious state on the library floor, his son had come stealthily in and snatched from a package of valuable papers, which he held in his spasmodically gripping hand, the will which was intended to give to a young girl named Garnet Pawnworth an equal share in his estate with his own son, because of a necessary restitution which would be explained in a paper folded inside the will.

The old man had been able to write down a brief description of his murderous assailant—brief, though enough, when it had reached the detective, Jack Grip, to show that that villain was no other than Pooler Jim's pal, Bill Crook.

For robbery and murder was Bill Crook now "wanted."

For a bold abduction was Pooler Jim "wanted." For complicity in both was young Cicero "wanted."

To Bootblack Ben the detective left the task of finding Cicero, while he pursued the uglier game.

Ben had not boasted idly when he said that he could find the youth. He felt that he would be again among the bootblacks of Gay street, plying his new swindling game of the banana speculation.

Removing the disguising black from his face in the wash-room of a factory near the bridge, after emerging from the vicinity of the "Meadow," he hurried toward the locality where he thought it most likely Cicero would be operating.

The message he had been given to deliver to the captain of the station he turned over to an American District Telegraph messenger, whom he chanced to meet, and into whose legs he put additional speed by paying him a quarter more than was charged.

He was ambitious to get on the track of Cicero at once.

The young scion had done precisely what Ben anticipated.

After summoning the physician, he had gone out at the rear of his home to an arbor in the small but luxuriant garden.

Under the seat of this arbor he had his disguise as a bootblack, and with the suit donned, the blacking-box slung over his shoulder, and his face smudged with dirt which he took up by handfuls from the path, he started forth from the gate in the high wall.

He had no wish to meet again that peculiar, burning stare of his father's eyes; though he had no idea that Thomas Rugby was so near his death, only supposing his condition to be the result of the nervous shock produced by an apparent encounter with the burglar whom he had assisted.

The wicked young rascal carried the stolen will in his inner pocket. He had not mustered the courage to destroy it yet.

"I'll clean out some more of these bootblack idiots and then skip the town," he was thinking, as he made his way toward Gay street.

And as if he had been expected by his patrons for some time, he was no sooner in sight than at least twenty of them congregated around him.

"Look here," he said, casting a severe glance upon the crowd; "some of you've been a-follerin' me 'round, you have, and I want to say 't if you do it any more I'll give up the speculation."

There was a murmur, the tenor of which was a denial of this accusation. The remark had been a feeler, and a look of relief, undiscernible by the others, settled in his smeared face.

"Wot's the news?" demanded a boy—one of those who had held back on the previous day, not caring to invest till he saw how his comrades fared.

"Heaps o' it, an' the best. You fellers wot 'vested into my speculation, you just step forward; an' the rest—you as ain't got any nerve—you just fall back there. The steamship Grip-East got in las' night, an' though it ain't more'n half a day yet, I've made a pile. I kin pay some divvies, an' the princ'pal too, if you want it—"

"Hi! hi!" interrupted the shrill voice of a youngster from the outer circle. "Here comes the Calvert street boys. Fight!"

"Fight! fight!" was taken up and echoed immediately.

Half a dozen at once began picking up stones and other missiles, as a knot of boys with blacking-boxes over their shoulders appeared coming from the direction of the Gay street pool-rooms.

There was a menace in their approach, and the inherent disposition of the rival gangs was for a fight at once and severely.

"Rab for Gay street!" yelled one.

But there was no answering shout from the coming gang.

Steadily onward they walked toward the waiting belligerents, and then the murmur of a discovery went up.

The intruders did not carry any missiles in hand for a fight!

And foremost among them was one, at sight of whom the face of the speculator bootblack blanched.

"Bootblack Ben's a-leadin' 'em," said one.

The murmur grew more sullen.

Ben evidently had a reputation that was to be feared if aroused to a fight, which he was, however, seldom known to indulge in.

Onward came Ben and his companions, and almost before the Gay street lads realized it, the two gangs were mixed together without a blow or a hurtling stone having been exchanged.

"I didn't come to make any row," Ben said, addressing them as he came up. "I'm here on a piece of business. And there won't be any broken heads unless you fellers make the trouble yourselves."

"What're you fellers a-comin' down on our ground for?" demanded the bootblack who had been the first recipient of the "nice" bootblack's confidence.

"I've come down to save you from bein' swindled out o' your boots—to do you a friendly service, that's all."

"What're you talkin' about?"

Ben turned toward the nice speculative bootblack, and his clear blue eyes fastened on the latter like the piercing brands of accusing lightning.

Leveling one finger, he said:

"I've come to arrest that feller."

"Arrest me!" shouted the culprit.

"That, an' nothin' more."

"An' how long since you was a policeman, say?"

"Since last night, after I didn't choose to die as you an' Pooler Jim meant I should. Look here, boys, do you know who this feller is?"

"No."

"When I tell you, you'll just be lively after his skin, I reckon. Why, that's the son o' one o' the richest men on Mount Vernon Place. His name is Cicero Rugby. He's come round here disguised just for to swindle you out of the hard-earned pennies you ought to be takin' home to your mummies. He isn't any bootblack at all; no more is he a speculator, 'cept it is to get all he can out o' you an' light out. If he's promised to pay you any divvies out o' that banana spec' at I happen to know all about, it's your own money he's payin' back, in the idea that you'll invest more. He ain't been readin' the papers for nothin' about this Ward failure over in New York. All the bananas he's going to spec in are in his eye—an' your money in his pocket. I'm just here to haul him in. He's wanted for somethin' worse than that, though," and turning to Cicero, he said: "You've got to go with me to police head-quarters, you have, 'cause I was ordered to bring you in—"

"You fool!" burst from Cicero, in his natural voice. "You won't take me in, if I know it!"

Simultaneous with the words, he aimed a blow at the head of the Bootblack Detective with his blacking box that might have laid the latter low had he not been prepared for just such an occurrence.

"No you don't!" and he caught the box by its strap, giving it a wrench that tore it from its owner's hand.

From the mob of boys there went up a howl.

Ben was known for his truthfulness; the rivalry of the gangs seemed suddenly to be forgotten in the exposure of the young swindler. The next instant the bridge seemed likely to become a scene of gore.

CHAPTER XII.

A BATTLE FOR A PRISONER.

IMMEDIATELY upon perceiving the effect of his words, Ben leaped close to the accused.

One of his brown hands grasped Cicero by the

collar; the other raised to wave back the mass of boys who seemed determined to wreak summary and terrible vengeance upon the one who had, they all believed, on the representation of Ben—coupled to the discovery that the young speculator had all along been addressing them in a disguised voice—deliberately swindled them out of their hard-earned pennies.

"Hol' on! Stand back!" shouted Ben. "Don't do anything like that. I want him myself, I do, for something a great deal worse than this here thing about the bananas. He's my prisoner."

"Toss 'im over the rail!"

"Souse 'im inter the falls!"

"Drown 'im! Pitch 'im over!"

A chorus of maddened cries arose simultaneously.

The crowd of boys pressed closer, notwithstanding the upraised hand of the Bootblack Detective.

"Stand back, I say!" Ben commanded.

His hold tightened on the collar of Cicero.

But he was not to be heeded by the angry bootblacks.

They wanted vengeance then and there; the whole attitude and appearance of Cicero seemed to confirm the charge that had been made against him.

And now Cicero began to realize his peril.

These lads whom he had so outrageously swindled were thirsting, in their righteous indignation, for his very life; there was no telling how far they would go if they succeeded in laying hold upon him.

"Where's my dollar 'at I give you, say?" howled the bootblack who had been the first to receive the supposed confidence of the pseudo speculator.

"An' my fifty cents!"

"An' mine!"

"Tip 'im over the rail!"

"That's just what we're a-goin' to do," yelled another, who was making the effort to reach the culprit through the tightly packed mass of boys.

"An' that's just what you fellers won't do 's long's I'm here an' got hold of him!" declared Ben, determinedly.

"You get out o' the road, Bootblack Ben!" shouted one who was evidently a leader of the Gay street gang. "Let go that feller, or it'll be the worse for you."

"I reckon I can take care of myself!"

And then was manifested the true reason for Ben's having accompanied himself with a portion of the Calvert street bootblacks.

The crowd was pressing him too close.

He saw that there was no use talking; if he hoped to retain Cicero as his prisoner, it must be done by main force.

"Rally! Rally!" he shouted, at the top of his shrill voice.

Instantly at the signaling cry, those who had come forward with him, threw themselves to the front.

Blacking-boxes were unswung, and, in imitation of their leader, Ben Brush, the leather straps were twined around the wrist in readiness to circle them in merciless blows.

The action precipitated the brewing collision.

Worked up to a frenzy, the Gay street gang answered the battle-cry of the Calvert street boys, and then—

There waved up from the Fayette street bridge such a pandemonium of cries, yells, screeches, as to attract the attention of people for a distance of a square in both directions.

A thrilling sight it was.

Two-score of lads engaged in a hand-to-hand combat; where blacking-boxes swung on high and came down here and there on the head or body of an antagonist spitefully.

Backward and forward across the bridge swayed the center of the warring mass, at times straining even the stout rail of the foot-path to its utmost with their packed bodies.

Louder the yells; and at times a shriek, as some unfortunate received a blow to stagger and blind him.

It was no child's play, this conflict of the rival gangs of bootblacks; the double incentive of desire to wreak vengeance upon the one who had swindled them, and from which object they were debarred by Bootblack Ben—and the ever living animosity that existed between the two gangs—combined to render the scene startling in its earnestness and savagery.

Throughout, with one hand still firmly gripping the collar of his cowering prisoner, Ben fought with his other hand—with his blacking box, rather—keeping a small circle cleared around him by the dexterity and precision of his movements, and more than once knocking one of his

nearer enemies squarely off his feet by the stroke of the adroitly wielded box.

"Don't let them get hold of me!" fairly whined Cicero, sharply through the din, and addressing his captor.

"Not if I can help it."

Such a scene had never been witnessed among the boys of the bootblack profession in the Monumental City.

Dozens of people were rushing to the spot—some on the distant corner were congregated in a knot, to look on from a safe distance; for it cannot be told at what moment the Baltimore urchin will discard the fists as implements of war and resort to the nearest pile of bricks.

The mob element is inherited by generations in them.

But it could not last long.

Two policemen, running abreast, came in sight.

The warning signal was given.

Then began a scampering of those who could run, and some swung themselves over the rail, to clamber out of sight on the under-trellis of the bridge.

Ben stood his ground, quietly waiting the arrival of the officers.

Immediately he was seized.

The second officer started in a chase after the less brisk of the recent mob.

"It's all right, mister," Ben said, as a gripe closed simultaneously upon himself and Cicero. "But don't you let that feller go, mind," nodding toward his legitimate captive.

"Oh, you're anxious to be taken in, are you?"

"That's just what's the matter. March us off to the station!"

"You're a cool one, anyhow."

"Reckon I am, when I know my business."

At the Central Station, to which the two boys were promptly marched, the captain eyed Ben steadily before asking a question.

"What's the charge, officer?"

"Rioting in the streets—"

"Captain, may I speak?"

"Ben, I'm afraid you're bent on spoiling your good character by this kind of going on. This is twice you've been brought in here; and heretofore you've had a reputation for being a well-behaved boy."

"Oh, I won't spoil. If you'll on'y just hear me."

"Well, say your say."

"I went for to capture this young feller, under instructions, an' I had to take him away from the Gay street boys by fightin' for him, that's all. I wanted to be taken in, for that matter, but I didn't want him to get away. I was bound to have my prisoner."

"Your prisoner, eh? What's he your prisoner for?"

"Because Mr. Grip, the detective, told me to find him an' get him into the station-house until he could get hold on him—Mr. Grip, I mean."

"Mr. Grip told you to capture the lad?"

"Yes, sir. And I couldn't do it without the fight on the bridge. It's good for him that I had some of my own boys along, too, or they'd have tossed him over into the falls. He's a swindler, he is—been takin' their earnin's an' makin' believe 'at he was speculatin' in bananas an' was goin' to give big per cent. profits to those who got taken in. Yes, sir, Mr. Grip told me to capture him, an' please don't you let him get away till Mr. Grip comes."

"So, he's a bootblack speculator, eh?"

"No, sir, he isn't a bootblack at all—"

"I am—I am!" broke in Cicero.

"Captain, he's lyin'. He's Cicero Rugby—the son o' Thomas Rugby who lives on Mount Vernon Place, an' he's been playin' a crook game among the boys."

"Tain't so! I'm a bootblack, the same as he is," burst from Cicero, unblushingly. "And he tried to get me tossed overboard by the boys on the bridge, 'cause I was takin' some of his trade away—"

"Captain, the scamp's a howlin' liar—"

"Hush! That's enough o' that. You say Mr. Grip wants the boy?"

"Yes, an' if you don't believe me, you can keep both o' us an' send for Mr. Grip, that's all—ain't that fair?"

"Turnkey!" the captain beckoned this important personage forward, and at a sign both lads were taken back, without further dialogue, to cells in the rear.

"If I ever get the chance," hissed young Rugby into Ben's ear, as they brushed for an instant together, "I'll kill you for exposing who I am."

"That's all right, Kickero. I reckon after Mr. Grip gets hold of you you won't be hurtin' "

many people. He's after you for the burglary what's been committed up to the mansion, an' I'm a witness, if he catches Pooler Jim, 'at you an' Jim was together in that little racket."

As Cicero was thrust and locked behind the bars, his face was pale with apprehension; but he maintained silence, contenting himself with scowling daggers at the Bootblack Detective until the walls between shut them from each other's view.

"Did you search them?" the captain asked, when the turnkey reappeared in the station-office.

"Yes."

"Find anything important?"

"Rather. The boy, Bootblack Ben, had this in his hip pocket," producing the revolver. "And the other had this paper, which certainly looks strange to be on the person of a bootblack," and he handed over the rail a folded document of legal shape.

"My gracious!" burst from the captain.

"Why, look here—'Last Will and Testament of Thomas Rugby!'"

The captain and the turnkey exchanged glances intently.

"Send around to the marshal's office and see if Mr. Grip can come here at once—or stop; I'll tick it off," rising and stepping to the telegraph apparatus.

The answer presently came back that Mr. Grip was out and his present whereabouts unknown.

"It's very singular—very singular," the captain muttered, as he proceeded to place the important paper away in the station safe. "There may be more in this affair with the boys than appears on the surface. 'I'll hold both until I see Grip.'"

It was in the afternoon that Grip put in an appearance.

He came hastily into the station with an order from the marshal for the detachment of four policemen, who were to accompany the detective, under his orders.

These were quickly forthcoming.

"Wait a moment," the captain said. "I've got a couple of boys here that I want you to see. There's something mysterious about their being brought in."

He led the way to the cells.

At the first cell, he looked in and saw Ben.

"Why, Ben!" he immediately exclaimed.

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you, Mr. Grip. I've got him."

"Got who?"

"Cicero. He's in the next cell. And now can't you explain to the captain, so's I can get out?"

Grip stepped to the adjoining cell and glanced in.

He at once recognized Cicero through the disguise.

"Did you find anything on this one?" he interrogated, turning to the captain.

"That's just it. I found a very mysterious paper. The will of Thomas Rugby—"

"Ah!"

A whispered conversation ensued.

A few minutes later the cell door was unfastened and Grip said to Ben:

"Come along. I think I've got something else for you to do."

The detective, accompanied by the detachment and the boy for whom he had conceived a strong liking, started immediately from the station.

As he went, he leaned and said to Ben, confidentially:

"The game's treed."

"Who?"

"Our men—Pooler Jim and his pal, Bill Crook."

Grip had a hack at hand. He placed the uniformed officers and Ben on the inside, mounting himself beside the driver.

CHAPTER XIII.

CORNERING THE QUARRY.

FAR out on the Gay street road, beyond the car line terminus, there stood a house amid a grove of locusts—a dilapidated affair known to be inhabited by a lone woman named Sally Pepper.

A woman tall and angular, and whose disposition for seclusion had succeeded in keeping from the slightest form of acquaintance any of the neighbors at the scattered houses around.

The lot she owned, and the house upon it; but so disagreeable had she made herself, that the owners of the adjacent lots had even deprived her of the privilege of drying her clothes thereon.

On this day, when the woman had a quantity

of clothing flung like many-colored flags to the breeze from the lines on an improvised shed on the top and rear of her bouse, a wagon stopped at her door and two men alighted, bearing the figure of a girl between them, who had a white, scared face.

No less than Pooler Jim, Bill Crook and their terrified captive, Garnet.

"What do you want here?" demanded Sally Pepper, snappishly, as she opened her door in answer to their summons.

"Shelter, Sal—"

"Oh, it's you, is it, Pooler Jim? Well, you can just mount into that there wagon again an' be off. I haven't any room for you here. Whose gal's that?"

"Look here, Sal, we've got a fortune in this gal. Now all you've got to do is to give us a place to keep her for awhile, till a little rumpus in town blows over, and you can come in for a share—"

"I don't want any shares, Pooler Jim. You know that I stopped all crooked things long ago an' retired on what I had."

"I'll give you a hundred dollars," spoke up Crook, producing the amount at the same time from a huge roll of bills, "if you'll break in on your resolutions just this once. Jim an' me's in a hole. If we try to keep on, we'll be headed off, no doubt; our best holt is to stay right around the town for awhile."

Her eyes glittered greedily as she looked at the tempting money, and she finally said:

"Well, give it here. But mind—just this once, an' you mustn't come around me again."

"All right. Now, where'll we put the girl?" as they entered.

"I'll show you."

As she turned and led the way, Pooler Jim said:

"You go along, Bill, and I'll get rid of the horse and wagon."

Jim drove off toward the brewery about a half-mile further along the road, where he left the team to be cared for, and left, too, an amount sufficient for the keep of the animal for a week.

"We'll have to be pretty close housed," he was thinking, "after what Bill says is going on. But I'll hang onto that gal, if it costs some blood-spilling, cuss me if I don't!"

Garnet had been placed in a room that was astonishingly strong considering the general appearance of dilapidation about the premises.

Bill Crook was seated at a table enjoying a bottle of vile liquor which another liberal offer of money had persuaded the woman to bring forth, when his partner returned.

"We're going to stay here about a week," he said to Sally Pepper, as he joined his pal at drinking. "An' to begin with, suppose you make up something for us to eat. You won't lose anything, Sal."

She set about preparing the desired meal, and surprised them by the abundance and variety of her possessions in the larder.

There was a continual and cunning glitter in her steely grey eyes, as she watched her guests furtively.

But she asked no more questions.

Leaving them eating and carousing, she stealthily made her way up to the room in which Garnet had been confined.

When Garnet was placed in here, Bill Crook had locked the door and put the key in his pocket.

But wily Sal Pepper had another key to fit it, and presently she was standing in the presence of the young captive.

"Hush!" she warned, placing a long, skinny finger across her lips. "Don't talk loud, but answer what I'm a-going to say to you. Who are you?"

Garnet thought she detected in the other's face something friendly. She came cautiously forward and said, in a low tone:

"My name's Garnet, and those men stole me from my friends. Will you help me out of here, ma'am?"

"What did they steal you for?"

"'Cause I'm the gutta-percha girl."

"Gutta-percha girl? What's that?"

"See!" and Garnet gave an exhibition of the wonderful elasticity of her skin.

Sally Pepper looked on in astonishment.

"They wanted to steal me and make a show of me, 'cause they said there was a heap of money to be made out of it! Oh, ma'am,"—suddenly and imploringly—"you'll help me to get away from them, won't you?"

The steely gray eyes fairly snapped, as Sally drew a paper from her pocket, and in some excitement she turned to the page of personal advertisements.

For the woman took the *Sun* regularly and was pretty well posted on the affairs of the world, even in her strange seclusion.

At last she found the advertisement she was looking for.

The same which Grip showed to Ben—the offer of a reward for the discovery of the elastic-skinned girl.

Sally Pepper, when she had read it carefully, glanced around as if she half expected to see the two men making to pounce upon her from the doorway.

"Hush!" she warned again. "Don't you make any noise. Yes, I'll get you out of this, an' that in a hurry, if I know myself!"

"What's that you were reading in the paper?—anything about me?" Garnet asked. "I know my friends, when they find I'm missing, might be apt to advertise for me."

"Hush up! Just you keep as still as a mouse. Don't try to get out of here. If you do, I'll put poison in your food, do you understand, and kill you!" and she laid a convulsive gripe on Garnet's wrist, again glancing apprehensively toward the door.

With another motion, she tiptoed away, leaving Garnet to imaginings that she was not, after all, to find the friend she had at first dared to hope for in this woman.

"Oh, dear!" moaned the dejected child, throwing herself on a pile of carpets at one side, "I'm so hungry! Won't I ever get free any more? I'm so hungry, too! Why don't they give me something to eat?"

Half-way down the stairs, Sally Pepper paused in a reflecting attitude, her eyes fixed on the bare and splintered floor.

"It's the gal! The elastic-skinned gal! Jim an' his pal have stole her. An' here's an offer of a reward for her an' for those 'at took her. I told Jim I'd stopped my crooked ways long ago; an' now if he don't believe me I'll show him. How'll I do it? I must send word to some officer that the men are here at my house."

A moment later she seemed to have hit upon an expedient.

And at the same instant there sounded the voice of Pooler Jim from the forward room:

"Sal!—oh, Sal! where are you? Bring us some more of this bottle stuff."

She hastened into the apartment.

"What's that you want?" she demanded.

"Whisky. Bring some more whisky—"

"There isn't anything more to drink in the house. But I'll tell you what I'll do, if you're willing to pay good for the trouble."

"What?"

"I'll go to the brewery an' get a crate of beer sent over here, since you two seem to be so flush. I drink a little beer myself sometimes, too."

"All right. Here's your money," giving her a twenty-dollar bill.

"They've been robbing somebody, besides getting away with the gal," she muttered, as she departed. "Well, I'll show you, Pooler Jim, 'at I meant what I said: I've given up all crooked ways."

At the brewery she gave the necessary orders for the beer.

Then she inquired of the proprietor:

"Say, haven't you got a telephone here?"

"I have."

"I want to use it."

"All right, there it is—help yourself."

Sal seemed suddenly plunged in a dilemma. She was totally unfamiliar with the working of the apparatus.

"Won't you please say what I want to say?"

"Yes. What is it?" going to the instrument.

"Who do you want to talk to?"

"The police marshal—"

Before she could say more a hand fell upon her shoulder.

"What have you to say to the police marshal, my good woman?"

She turned upon the speaker.

The person was no other than Jack Grip.

The detective had already followed his quarry so far through information received from the northeastern station, as to learn that the identical wagon and the people in it had passed out on the Bel Air road.

Tracking it persistently, he at last found that it had not passed the forks of the road near the brewery.

More, within five minutes gone, he had ascertained that the wagon he described had been left there, at the brewery stables, by a man, a description of whom, though scant, told him was Pooler Jim.

The scoundrels were, therefore, hiding somewhere in the neighborhood.

Standing at the counter sipping a small glass

of beer to refresh himself after his long chase, his alert ears at once caught a significance in the woman's announcement that she wished to communicate with the police marshal.

Instantly he tapped her on the shoulder, questioning:

"What have you to say to the police marshal, my good woman?"

"I don't know as that's anybody's business but my own," was the sharp reply.

"Maybe it is and maybe it isn't. Are you looking for police to arrest the two men who have the girl?"

"What girl?" and Sal's orbs widened.

But the keen detective saw that her surprise was simulated.

"Look here," he said, slyly turning the lapel of his vest.

The action revealed the detective badge, and her glance fell on it for just a single instant.

"You're a detective?"

He nodded.

She hesitated a moment and then said, with a glance over her shoulder at the proprietor of the place:

"Come outside."

When they reached the road, out of earshot from the bar, Sal said:

"Are you lookin' for a little gal?"

"That's precisely it. And I am looking for the men who made away with her. Now, what did you want to communicate with the police marshal for?"

Grip instantly realized that he had struck a clew through his first impulsive speech to the woman.

"Mind, I want the reward," she said, singularly.

"You know where I can find those I am after?"

"Maybe."

"At your house, no doubt. And since I begin to smell a mice, I'll just go over with you and nab my game—"

She broke in with a harsh laugh that even deceived the keen sleuth.

"You're 'way off. But if you'll give me your word, I'll tell you where to find the men an' the gal."

"Word for what?"

"About the reward the paper offered this morning."

"Very well, tell me, and I promise to see to it that you get the reward."

"It's a square bargain?"

"Yes, square all over."

"Then—they are at my house."

"I thought so. Where do you live?"

She pointed off in the direction of her dilapidated home.

Adding to the motion:

"Don't you flatter yourself 'at you can take 'em by yourself. If you don't have some help you'll find yourself stabbed an' shot before you get through with Pooler Jim. I know him well enough."

Grip acted on this advice.

"You keep them supplied with liquor till I can close in," he said, when he learned that they were drinking heavily. "I'll make you all safe about the reward."

He remounted the horse that had brought him there and started on a lively gallop back toward the city.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ASTOUNDING CLIMAX.

WHEN the hack containing the detective and the policeman reached a point on the road a short distance beyond the car-stables, Grip told the driver to halt.

Bidding him await there, he ordered forth his assistants with Ben at his side.

"I know just where to put my hand on the rogues," he remarked, to the boy. "And while we're bagging them, you get around lively and find the girl, for that she is also in the house, there is no question."

"All right, Mr. Grip."

It was almost dark when they arrived, stealthily, before the isolated home of Sally Pepper.

So dark, that Sally had long ago lighted a spluttering lamp for her guests, who were, however, scarcely in need of it, as they had drunk themselves nearly drunk, and were at that very moment stretched out on the floor in a sort of brutish sleep.

At the time, the woman was tip-toeing into the room.

Her steely eyes glittered avariciously, and she was approaching the slumbering form of Pooler Jim.

From her shriveled lips there were escaping

words not above a whispery hiss, and her fingers, like the talons of some huge bird, were working as if in anticipation of presently grasping something.

"I'll have the money—yes," she was saying to herself. "It won't do them any good when they're caught; I might as well take it. Jim's got it in his breast-pocket; I saw Bill Crook hand it to him. Drunken fools! They'll wake up to find themselves in the gripe of the police. But what do I care? I'll have the money, and they'll be sent up for so long, that I needn't be afraid of their ever doing me any harm."

Reaching the form of the man, she stooped noiselessly and inserted one hand beneath his coat.

She could scarcely suppress a cry of triumph as her bony fingers closed on the great wallet in which she had seen so much wealth.

"It's mine!" she aspirated, rising and beginning to retreat.

But she paused.

Her ears had detected footsteps on the roadway—some one had evidently stumped a toe against a cobble or loose brick.

She cast a half-frightened glance around.

"They're coming. But I have the money. And the police won't suspect me of having it.—Ah!"

The footstep was again audible.

She did not want to be seen in the room with the drunken wretches, lest, when possible search was made for the money which she reasonably conjectured the two had stolen, she should be suspected of having it.

At one side of the room was a closet.

Like a gaunt gliding specter she ran to this, thrusting herself inside and closing the door.

The door, which had a patent spring, gave a loud click as it slammed shut harder than she had intended.

And the sound aroused Bill Crook.

Raising to one elbow, he glanced bewilderedly around.

Then the bewildered glance gave way to a stare of astonishment and dismay combined.

In the doorway were several men in uniforms of blue.

Foremost was a man whom even his half drunken senses recognized as Jack Grip, the well-known detective.

"Surrender, my birds!" exclaimed Jack, coming briskly forward.

Crook scrambled to his feet with alacrity.

He blurted an oath and cried:

"Jim! Jim Jarrett! Wake up! The police—the police!"

At the same time he drew a revolver and fired straight into the officers in the doorway in his desperation.

It needed no second warning to arouse Pooler Jim.

He was up as if on springs.

At one sweep, he knocked the lamp from the table—his alert mind, even in the midst of debauchery, having a fertile readiness for expedients.

Instantaneously with the darkness, a revolver shot rung through the room, as if in echo of the shot fired by Bill Crook.

A shriek of mortal agony followed the report.

Ten a desperate form came hurling against the officers—hurling and squeezing between them out into the passage before they could intercept it.

Grip struck a patent fuse.

The light showed the body of Bill Crook lying prone and dead on the bare boards of the floor.

"The other's Pooler Jim!" he cried. "After him. He's gone up-stairs! Forward!"

In a body they pursued the fleeing ruffian, whose pattering footsteps were audible on the next floor above.

At the front of the hall in the second story was a small room.

Into this Jim dashed, closing and locking the door, and immediately piling against it what few articles of furniture were in the apartment to form a barricade.

As the officers were striving to force the door, down-stairs a little creeping flame, caused by the knocking of the lamp from the table, was making headway over the dry planking.

Larger and larger it was growing with every passing second.

In the closet Sally Pepper, clutching tightly on the money she had purloined from the pocket of Pooler Jim, was smiling grimly at her safe concealment and the prospect that the police would soon depart, leaving her in possession of the wealth.

"Somebody's shot," she muttered. "They're at killing one another. But I don't care who

gets killed. I have the money. Oh, how I love money!"

A crash followed presently on the upper floor. The door of the forward room had been burst open finally by the combined efforts of the officers.

But when Grip flared ahead the light of another fuse, they saw that Jim had disappeared.

"The roof! He's out on the roof!" cried Grip. "After him!" and he set the example, springing toward a slim ladder set against the rim of a scuttle in the ceiling, which led to the clothes-drying roof of Sally Pepper's house.

Following him, all were presently out on the unstable structure.

But Pooler Jim was not to be seen.

While the officers were trying to break down the door of the room, something terrific had happened to the villain.

Scrambling out upon the roof, he paused to remove his boots and then ran around the eaves to see what chances for escape he might have from the elevated position.

At last, he struck upon a method.

Tearing down one of the lengths of clothes-line, he made a hasty loop in one end and secured it by the chimney.

Retaining a hold upon the other end he ran toward the eave.

Just as he reached the edge and was about to stoop to lower himself over easily, he tripped upon a bag of clothes-pins.

A curse escaped him.

He struggled frantically to regain his balance.

A useless struggle.

Over he went.

And how it happened Pooler Jim never lived to explain; but as he instinctively retained his desperate hold on the end of the rope, this rope seemed suddenly imbued with a snaky tangle—the tangle passed around his neck as he went pitching headlong downward.

Then there was a sudden tension of the rope—a snap like the crack of bones.

A limp body hung below in the gloom, twirling round and round as if the rope was a thing of life striving to disentangle itself from the neck of the man it had killed.

For his neck had been utterly broken by the fall in the coil of the rope.

A search discovered the dead body shortly afterward.

While they were taking down the body, the flames of the burning floor within attracted them.

They all hastened inside to try and extinguish the fire.

But there was no use in the attempt. The tiny flames had now become huge darting tongues; the apartment was filled with dense and stifling smoke.

"Out of this," Grip ordered. "And bring the body of that man along with you," pointing toward dead Bill Crook.

The trampling of feet and the mingling of their voices drowned the sound of another voice that was straining to its utmost there.

No one heard the voice of the woman, Sally Pepper—the tone of agonized fright with which she cried, smothered already nearly to death in the closet by the subtle smoke that penetrated her concealment.

"Let me out! Let me out! The house is on fire!" she shrieked frantically. "I'll be burned alive! Let me out! Here, in the closet! Help! Help!"

But no one heard.

And the flames burnt higher and fiercer and the smoke grew denser and the scorching heat expanded till it blistered and lapped up into flame everything around.

Then the whole building from ground floor to roofing, in one great roar, glared forth on the sky, sending its crackling embers up, up in the draught of heat in showering sparks and billows.

"I wonder what became of the woman?" Grip queried, as they drew near to the back. "But she'll show up in good time, I guess, to claim the reward. Where's Ben?"

"Here, Mr. Grip."

"And—and—"

"Yes, I've got her, you bet!"

In the excitement attending the final cornering of the ruffians and the pursuit of Pooler Jim, with the after occurrence of the fire, Grip had half forgotten about the child.

Ben here brought forward Garnet.

He had not been idle in the part assigned to him.

It did not require long for him to burst the door of the rear room up-stairs, and Garnet's joy

at finding herself in the hands of Ben Brush can better be imagined than described.

An officer was left in charge of the bodies at a house near by while Grip and the rest repaired straightway to the station.

His report to the marshal shortly was a very satisfactory one.

"Probably it's better that the State is saved the trouble of hanging the scoundrels after all," was that official's opinion.

And he added:

"Here's a note that was left by a messenger for you a few moments ago."

Grip opened the missive and read, with amazed eyes:

"MR. GRIP:—Come to the Rugby mansion. Astonishing discovery. Rugby not dead!"

SILAS HARTWELL, M. D."

For the family physician of the Rugbys had been startled nearly out of his wits at a message he had received from the undertaker sent to prepare Thomas Rugby's remains for burial, in the early part of the evening. Like this:

"DR. HARTWELL:—Come to Rugby mansion at once. Rugby isn't dead at all!"

And so it proved. The rich gentleman whom the physician had surely thought dead, had only relapsed into a transient condition of coma that had deceived him completely.

Thomas Rugby, when the man of medicine arrived, was awake and entirely conscious, with his faculties completely restored.

He greeted the astonished physician calmly.

Hartwell instantly dispatched the message to the detective, to whom he had communicated the circumstances which he had believed caused Rugby's death.

When Grip arrived, Rugby was conversing, though his efforts were very weak.

"I don't want any harm to come to my boy," were his first words. "If you can only find him and get back the will he stole from me when I lay in the library, and if you can find Garnet, I shall be satisfied."

Then he turned on his pillow and fell asleep refreshingly.

His recovery was only a question of a few days.

Grip had a lengthy conversation with young Cicero.

When the youth had all the heinousness of his crime painted in the most glowing colors language was capable of, and learned that his old father was ready to forgive, he was overcome to tears which the detective saw were genuine.

Grip obtained his release from custody, becoming responsible for him.

When, after a few days, Thomas Rugby was able to be out of bed and to converse upon the strange occurrences which had become mixed in the family, he had Cicero and Garnet both before him.

The young girl around whom had clustered so many rapid dangers was at last with a true protector, and Cicero became at once as much her friend as he had previously been her enemy.

Indeed, no one knew how the youth, in the silence of his heart, thanked Heaven that matters had turned out finally as they had, to release him from the entanglements which had made him a villain at such an early age by his collusion with Pooler Jim and Bill Crook.

He made a clean and manly confession and was forgiven.

To Grip was given a handsome and substantial reminder of satisfaction for the services he had rendered.

But Grip stated that he felt Ben Brush to be entitled to as much praise as himself, and the Bootblack Detective who had so bravely followed Garnet's trail to her ultimate rescue, was brought in for a good share of thanks and crisp reward.

The two youths, Ben and Cicero, shook hands in the presence of the old gentleman, who said to Ben:

"My son has done wrong toward some boys, whose names you may know—at any rate you can find them. Will you do me the favor, my lad, of returning to them whatever my erring son may have taken from them in the shape of money? Here is the amount, which Cicero tells me is correct."

Ben promised, of course. It may be relied upon that there were more amicable feelings inaugurated between the Gay street and the Calvert street gangs of bootblacks when Ben Brush, of the latter class, came forward to restore to them that which they had given up for lost.

But the parting between Garnet and Ben was quite a picture.

He held her little hand in his and said:

"You an' I've got to part now, Miss Garnet. An' I want you to promise me 'at you'll think sometimes of Ben Brush, 'cause we may never meet any more."

"I'll never forget you, Ben."

In an impulse which she freely forgave, the boy leaned quickly and kissed her red lips.

Then Ben Brush, the Bootblack Detective, was gone, and the romance of Garnet's abduction was a thing of the past.

Garnet is happy in her elegant new home, on Mount Vernon Place; even saturnine Mrs. Rugby seemed to have been softened by what had transpired to momentarily darken her home, and treated the advent of the adopted child with at least gentleness.

What the secret was that caused Thomas Rugby to wish to make restitution, for some cause, to the daughter of Samuel and Rachel Fawnworth, has not yet transpired, and Thomas gives promise of living for many years to come with the secret still locked in his breast and in the paper which will only reach the public eye when that will which gives a share to Garnet is opened.

The workmen who have since cleared away the debris from the premises of Sally Pepper's burned domicile found some charred human bones there, and it was supposed that she perished unaccountably in the flames.

THE END.

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